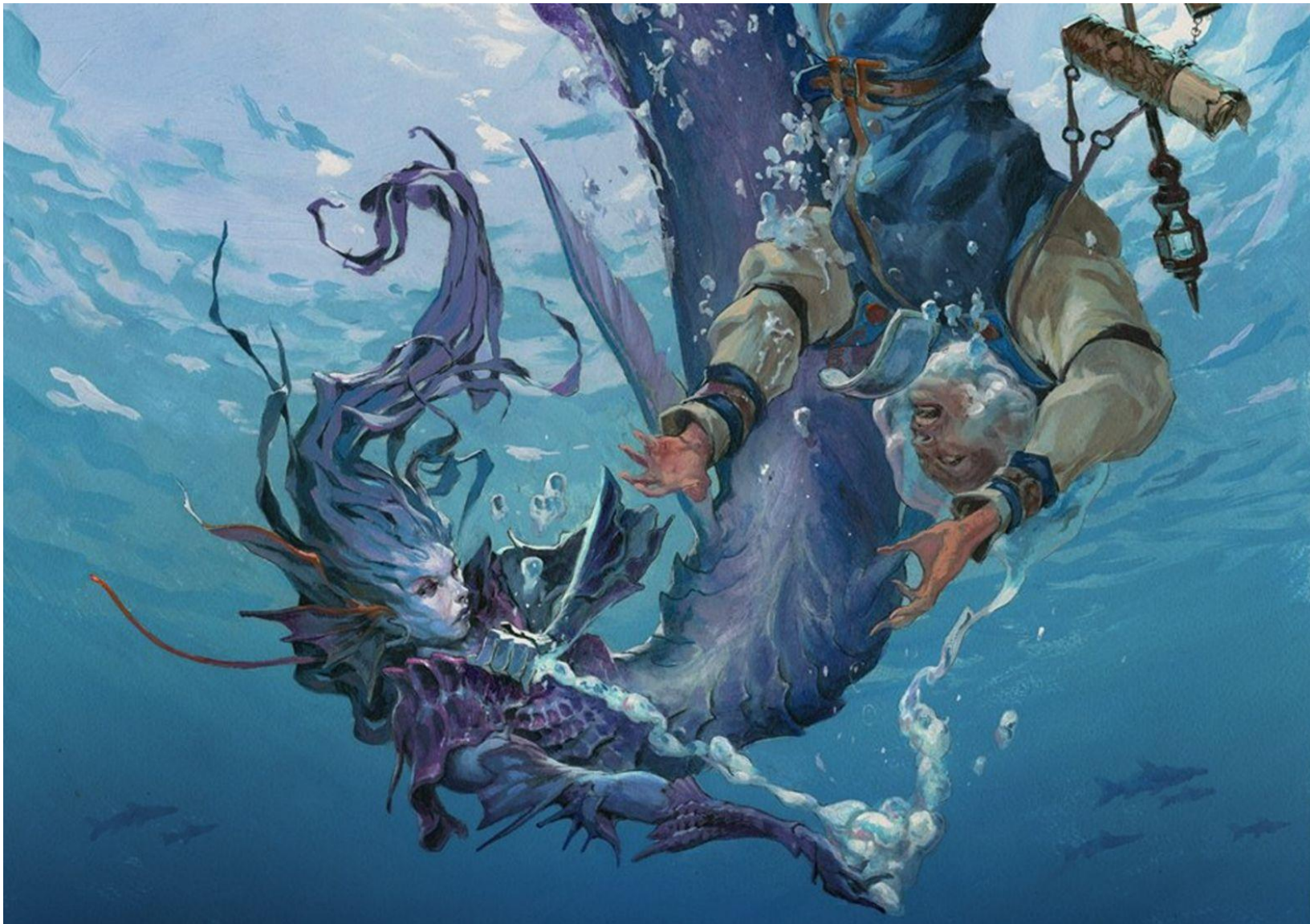

MODERN MERFOLK

2024 Primer

by m_joe

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Cover Illustration: "Merfolk Trickster" by Jesper Eising

Hey! Hang on there a second!

This Modern Merfolk primer took well over a **hundred hours** to write. The expertise and information contained in its pages were gathered over **a decade** spent playing and making content related to the deck.

I'm very proud of this primer. I'm also very proud of how supportive and kind my friends in the Modern Merfolk community are. Because of this, I have chosen to make my primer **free for all to use, without restriction!**

However, if you enjoy this content, **please consider making a contribution** (if you have the means)! There are a couple of ways to contribute:

- You can send money directly via PayPal to **merfolkjoe@gmail.com**
- You can send money directly via Zelle to **merfolkjoe@gmail.com**

Donate whatever you think the primer is worth to you. Maybe a NM Beta Island ($40)? Maybe ten NM Beta Islands ($400)? Maybe a summer house in Mallorca ($1,000,000)? Get creative!

Thanks, in advance, for your contribution! I hope you enjoy the primer!

Sincerely,

Merfolk Joe

CHAPTER 1: *Why Play Modern Merfolk?*

WHY PLAY MODERN MERFOLK?

Modern is an extremely diverse and well-established format with countless viable competitive archetypes created and honed over the past decade and more. With so many compelling decks on offer, **why should you choose Merfolk?**

First and foremost, Modern Merfolk offers **replayability**! Unlike some other decks in the format, Merfolk has to adjust its strategy in every single match; we do not simply repeat the same predictable patterns over and over again. The ability to navigate individual matchups and board states is what differentiates experienced Merfolk pilots from newer players. And in a format as deep as Modern, a player can train diligently for a long period and still not reach the full potential that Merfolk, with its flexible play style, offers. This room to grow into the deck rewards players for their efforts and sustains interest in the archetype even over the course of many years.

Modern Merfolk is somewhat unique as a blue deck, in that it plays a generally aggressive, creature-oriented tribal strategy, but leverages this aggressive approach with all the trickiness the color blue allows. In this way, Modern Merfolk offers **consistently diverse gameplay**, encompassing a wide swath of all that Magic: The Gathering has to offer: interaction, permission (counterspells), intricate combat decisions, and a constant reassessment of whether we should be more controlling or aggressive.

Modern Merfolk is **competitive**! Even though Modern is full of arguably "broken" (ie, exceedingly strong) cards and decks, Merfolk has always been able to go toe-to-toe with nearly any opponent and come out on top. The addition of newly-printed cards periodically increases the power of our tribal synergies; in 2022, Modern Merfolk experienced a renaissance with the addition of Vodalian Hexcatcher and Svyelun of Sea and Sky. These two cards allowed the deck to reach heights in the metagame it hadn't attained in many years. Now, at the end of 2023, the deck has received two new cards that appear to have even greater potential: Tishana's Tidebinder and Deeproot Pilgrimage.

Modern Merfolk is also **affordable**! While most Modern decks exceed $1,000, Merfolk decks generally cost significantly less, coming in around $800.

Another cost-related benefit of choosing Merfolk is that a **budget version** can still be very competitive! One can buy the deck for only $200 or so (including the vast majority of the full-powered deck), then pick up the more expensive cards as one's budget allows, over time. Please see Chapter 17 for more information if this approach is of interest to you!

Last, but certainly not least, Modern Merfolk enjoys an incredibly active and friendly **community** of players! This point is discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

ASK THE PROS

But don't take my opinion for it! Here are a few well-known Modern Merfolk players talking about why they love the deck so much!

"I love counterspells, drawing cards, tricky artifacts/creatures and utility lands; Merfolk has them all! As a mono-blue player at heart, I was drawn to Merfolk's simple design yet complex gameplay. In a field of harsh haymakers and banned combos/cards over the years, Merfolk still prevailed with the most honest and fragile strategy: play creatures and attack for the win. Merfolk is not a powerful deck (and often it is pretty clunky), hence it is a real challenge to pilot but incredibly rewarding to win with. Every matchup looks like David vs Goliath, so if you win you know you earned it! Merfolk has just enough resources across all their cards to take on the best decks in any given metagame, and I think that's pretty magical."

Nikachu

Streamer and Modern Merfolk Master

Top 8/Beta Draft Magic30 Las Vegas 2022, 2nd Place GP Vancouver 2017

"Around 2003, I used to play a lot against a friend who had Alex Bortah's World Championship gold-bordered deck (list **here**). It was mono-blue, and made a big impression on me; I found the deck building very interesting, how it ran many full playsets of cards. A decade later, I finally put together my first mono-blue deck: Legacy Merfolk. I managed to make Top 64 in a Legacy Championship event (the $100 prize allowed me to buy my fourth Force of Will)! This encouraged me to pursue Merfolk in Legacy and, eventually, Modern.

"What I love about Modern Merfolk is how it can switch from playing aggro to control as needed, depending on the game state (at least, the way I build my control-oriented lists, which use many playsets, just like the old Alex Bortah deck). Though, to be honest, the main reason I've played it so much was that **it was basically the only mono-blue deck I could afford then.** Eventually, budget stopped being a concern, but I enjoyed the deck and continued winning with it, so I kept playing it!

"I hope we can help people find more enjoyment in this silly game, especially with everything going on in the world right now, I don't think even a small amount of enjoyment in life is really trivial anymore."

MHayashi

Modern Merfolk Innovator

Frequent MTGO Modern League Trophy Leader

I picked Modern Merfolk up because I loved its style of gameplay. **It reminded me a lot of Mono-Blue Devotion**, the deck I had been playing in Standard, plus it was pretty **budget-friendly** (I even got to reuse those Mutavaults and Masters of Waves)! I always really enjoyed the cat-and-mouse game against Standard Blue-White Control, trying to whittle their life total down while not over-committing to the board. That matchup knowledge against Blue-White definitely carried over into Modern. **Plus, I really loved how Merfolk could out-grind Jund, the supposed king of the grind!**

Simon Slutsky

Modern Merfolk Champion

Winner of GP Los Angeles 2016

When I was first introduced to Magic back around 2004, I was given a mono-blue deck to play (thank you, Stephen, rest in peace). It was full of nonsense but I loved playing with Counterspell, and the aesthetic of the blue spells.

I've always been fascinated by the ocean, so the color of sea creatures was a natural fit for me. My very first constructed deck was Merfolk. I went down to my LGS and bought up my sets of Lord of Atlantis and various Rootwater fish, and was then ready to jam games every recess. Not long after, Lorwyn was released and I was able to play Merfolk in tournament settings and, thanks to the inception of Modern, I got to continue this for years.

Merfolk has incredible depth to it beyond the surface, and its greatest strength is its consistency paired with its adaptability. Throughout Modern's history, I've always felt Merfolk could compete if built correctly. Within the archetype there are Aggro, Control, and Combo builds, and you can splash any of the four other colors (and sometimes even play three-color variations). I've been playing Merfolk almost exclusively in Modern for about ten years now, and this flexibility means I never get bored of playing it! If anything, I'm very excited for each new set, to see what new blue cards can find their home within.

Play what you love for however you love to play the game!

David Bishop (Bishark)
Modern Merfolk Innovator
Creator of Modern Sprawlfolk, Flickerfolk, and Mono-Blue Devotion

PLAY STYLE SUMMARY

As mentioned above, Modern Merfolk is a blue tribal creature deck using tricky gameplay to gain an advantage. This is a good, very general way to understand the deck.

Getting more specific, **Modern Merfolk is a tempo deck.** This means it looks to deploy one or more early threats to present an early clock, while simultaneously disrupting the opponent's game plan. In this way, Merfolk seeks to end games quickly, before decks with bigger, scarier cards even have a chance to get their feet under them. Click **here** for a video discussing the concept of tempo in greater depth.

Enhancing Merfolk's aggressive tempo plan is the **Islandwalk** ability, which makes our creatures **unblockable** if the opponent controls an Island.

Because Islandwalk is so central to Merfolk's strategy, the deck plays cards such as Tide Shaper and Spreading Seas to turn lands into Islands, providing access to Islandwalk while **disrupting the opponent's mana.**

Aether Vial is another essential piece of the tempo puzzle. Vial is effectively part of our manabase, allowing us to put our creatures into play. Modern Merfolk's best turn one play is virtually always Aether Vial, in order to begin adding counters to it as soon as possible. More than simply putting our creatures into play, Vial can do so at instant speed, allowing us to respond flexibly to whatever the opponent does on their turn.

A final important point: **Modern Merfolk can be built to compete in nearly any metagame.** We have tools that interact with creature-heavy metas as well as spell-heavy metas. With an informed understanding of what we might expect to encounter at any tournament, we can do well!

MERFOLK AND THE MODERN METAGAME

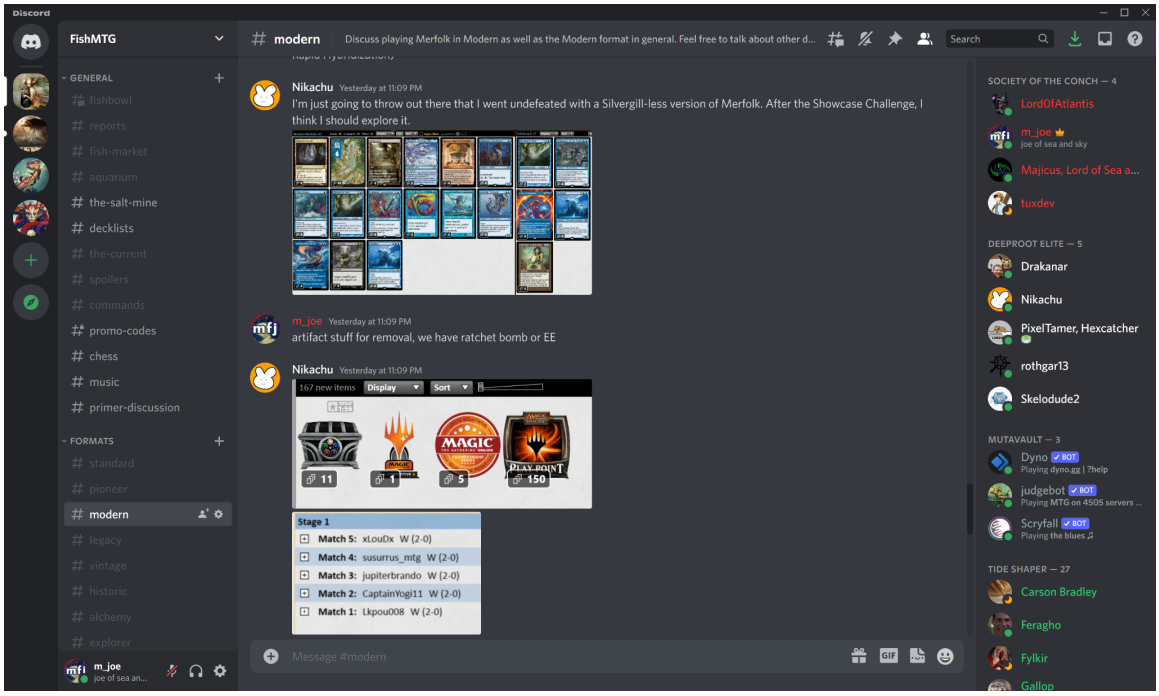
As mentioned in the previous section, Merfolk has a very deep toolbox of spells that allows the main deck and sideboard to be flexibly adapted to face fluctuations in the Modern metagame. However, despite this flexibility, there are some types of matchups that will simply always tend to be positive or negative for Merfolk.

In a broad (but accurate) sense, Merfolk is usually stronger against spell-based decks, as we can simply stock up on counterspells and other relevant interaction. The flip-side of this is that Merfolk is usually weaker against creature-based decks, particularly ones that can deploy many threats very quickly (such as Hardened Scales or Elves), or ones built around creature combos (such as Yawgmoth or Hammer). We also tend to scoop to a resolved Ensnaring Bridge (though the addition of Otawara, Soaring City has helped address this weakness). Below is a list showing **how Merfolk lines up against other popular Modern archetypes:**

Rhinos: Even
Yawgmoth: Unfavored
Mono-Green Tron: Favored
Murktide: Favored
Amulet Titan: Even
Hammer Time: Very Unfavored
Living End: Very Favored
Hardened Scales: Very Unfavored
Burn: Very Favored
Domain Zoo: Even
Creativity: Even
Coffers: Unfavored
Scam: Favored
Omnath Control: Even
Death's Shadow: Favored
Mill: Very Favored
Grixis Control: Favored
UWx Control: Even

MODERN MERFOLK COMMUNITY

One of Modern Merfolk's greatest strengths is its extremely active community of players. These days, this community congregates primarily on Discord. As of this writing, the **FishMTG** server has nearly 3,000 members, including many experienced players who are always happy to answer questions. There is daily conversation about all things Merfolk, from card choices to sideboarding strategy to upcoming events and recent results. There are frequent streams of Modern league gameplay, as well. If you are curious about Modern Merfolk, please stop by!



CHAPTER 2: *Modern Merfolk History*

THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN MERFOLK

Modern Merfolk has existed in a panoply of forms since the format's inception. Through the march of years, the deck slowly evolved as new sets were printed and pilots proved new cards worthy with tournament success.

The Modern format was created in May 2011 (the closest previous analogue to the format was Extended). A few months after the format's inception, the first MTGO Modern Daily result for "**Merfolk**" appeared. It was a fascinating blue-black approach including Dark Confidant and Agony Warp. A mono-blue list from the period looked like **this**, much closer to familiar lists of today. Note the absence of **Master of the Pearl Trident**, which wouldn't be printed until the following year (2012) in Magic 2013.

Here is a list from late 2012. Note the white splash, exploring using Path to Exile in the main deck and powerful white spells in the sideboard. Also, note **Spreading Seas** in the sideboard - pilots had not yet reached a consensus on the card's place in the deck, and its numbers varied wildly in the main and/or side. Some lists even ran zero Spreading Seas in their 75, opting instead for just a pair of Sea's Claims in the main, as in **this** list (also playing white - this splash was quite popular during this period).

Master of Waves was printed in September 2013 in Theros. Initially, there was a great deal of debate on whether this powerful new card would make the cut; many argued that it was "not what Merfolk wants to be doing!" For the first month or two after Theros was released, successful **lists** continued to appear without Master of Waves. The doubters were proven wrong fairly quickly, however, as, by November, virtually every list ran a playset of the big 4-drop creature, as seen in **these three examples**. Note that, by this time, Spreading Seas had become ubiquitous, as a reliable way to gain access to Islandwalk that also provided devotion for Master of Waves.

The next major addition to the deck was **Harbinger of the Tides** in July 2015, with the release of Magic Origins. There was far less debate around the inclusion of this new interactive Merfolk. A **list** from the month before Harbinger's release shows the inclusion of a playset of Vapor Snags. A **list** from the month after Harbinger's release shows a playset of Harbingers neatly replacing those Vapor Snags.

Towards the end of 2017, the Ixalan block brought some new green toys in the form of **Kumena's Speaker**, **Merfolk Branchwalker**, and **Merfolk Mistbinder** (there were many others, some of which even saw extensive testing, but these are the three cards that stuck to some extent in Modern Merfolk). This created an entire new branch in our deck's family tree, with new, aggressive blue-green strategies beginning to take down tournaments. **Simic Merfolk** lists even managed to make Top 8 in consecutive SCG Open weekends in October 2017. While Branchwalker was eventually abandoned, Speaker and Mistbinder continue to see play today in Simic lists.

Fish Facts

Harbinger of the Tides was very strong at the time of its printing, because one of the top decks in Modern then was **Splinter Twin.** They would play their four-mana enchantment and tap their creature. We would vial (or flash) in Harbinger to bounce it, interrupting the combo and destroying the enchantment! (This also worked against Kiki-Jiki, but the opponent could recast it the next turn.)

In April 2018, **Merfolk Trickster** was printed in Dominaria. The text of the card was spoiled when the release notes of the entire set were leaked nearly two months in advance. This new flash creature, with its unique ability, ignited the Merfolk community and initiated a burst of brewing. Initial speculation was that Trickster would likely

be a 2-of or 3-of. But it very rapidly became clear that it should be a core 4-of, as seen in Nikachu's 5-0 **list** just a few weeks after Trickster's printing. Merfolk Trickster has had a far deeper and more lasting effect on the deck than Harbinger of the Tides or Master of Waves (or any of the green cards mentioned above) before it.

The first Modern Horizons set, printed in June 2019, introduced two blue "canopy" lands, **Waterlogged Grove** and **Fiery Islet**, which were happily welcomed into Modern Merfolk's manabase. Far more significant from this set, however, was the printing of **Force of Negation**, which remains a core part of the deck today. As a "free" counterspell, Force enhanced the deck's tempo plan by allowing us to spend all our mana developing our board while still being able to interact with the opponent. A **list** from July 2019 shows the quick inclusion of the canopy lands as well as Force of Negation (though at only three copies - most lists today include a full playset).

Sadly, Modern Merfolk languished in the two years following the printing of Modern Horizons, as the format came to be dominated by powerful cards from that set and subsequent sets. Hogaak, Arisen Necropolis from Modern Horizons ruled over Modern for several months before it was finally banned in late August 2019. This was followed by Oko, Thief of Crowns from Throne of Eldraine (October 2019) and, to a lesser extent, Uro, Titan of Nature's Wrath from Theros Beyond Death (January 2020) warping the metagame. Oko was banned in January 2020, but Uro remained a problem for an entire year, receiving a ban only in January 2021.

In June 2021, Modern Horizons 2 was printed, and Merfolk finally got some love again. **Tide Shaper** was effectively Spreading Seas on a body, allowing the deck to up its creature density while maintaining access to Islandwalk. The deck also received **Svyelun of Sea and Sky**, objectively the highest-powered Merfolk ever printed in Modern. This powerful creature provided something the deck had long lacked: an excellent late-game draw that could single-handedly claw us back from losing positions. With these two additions, Merfolk began putting up results once again, with lists such as **this** and **this**.

Another interesting printing in Modern Horizons 2 was **Counterspell.** Many people had long wondered why this card had not been printed into Modern ages ago, while others were convinced it would destroy the format. Suffice it to say, the format withstood the inclusion of Counterspell; as of this writing, it is the 13th most-played non-creature spell in Modern - respectable, but far from dominating. Many Merfolk players have tested the card, primarily as a sideboard choice. However, as our manabase now typically includes a full playset of Cavern of Souls in addition to our playset of Mutavault, the UU casting cost makes Counterspell a liability. We look instead to more easily-castable options such as Force of Negation, Mystical Dispute, Flusterstorm, and Spell Pierce.

Dominaria United was printed in September 2022, and, with it, **Vodalian Hexcatcher** was introduced to the world. There was very little doubt that it was special and would certainly be included as a 4-of in the deck; a flash body that makes all our creatures into potential counterspells appeared to be exactly what our tempo deck needed. Indeed, the results began pouring in; here is one Merfolk **list** that won first place in a 64-player event only a week after we gained access to the card.

In November 2023, The Lost Caverns of Ixalan gave Modern Merfolk two extraordinary cards: **Tishana's Tidebinder** and **Deeproot Pilgrimage.** The reach and flexibility of Tidebinder's "stifle" ability was staggering to consider. In fact, the card quickly proved itself so powerful that many other non-Merfolk decks in Modern began playing with it, too! And Deeproot Pilgrimage's hexproof tokens provided a much-needed source of virtual card advantage following the departure of Silvergill Adept from the deck. Early results with these two cards showed a great deal of experimentation, including a **Simic** list, an **Izzet** list, and **several different Mono-Blue lists**.

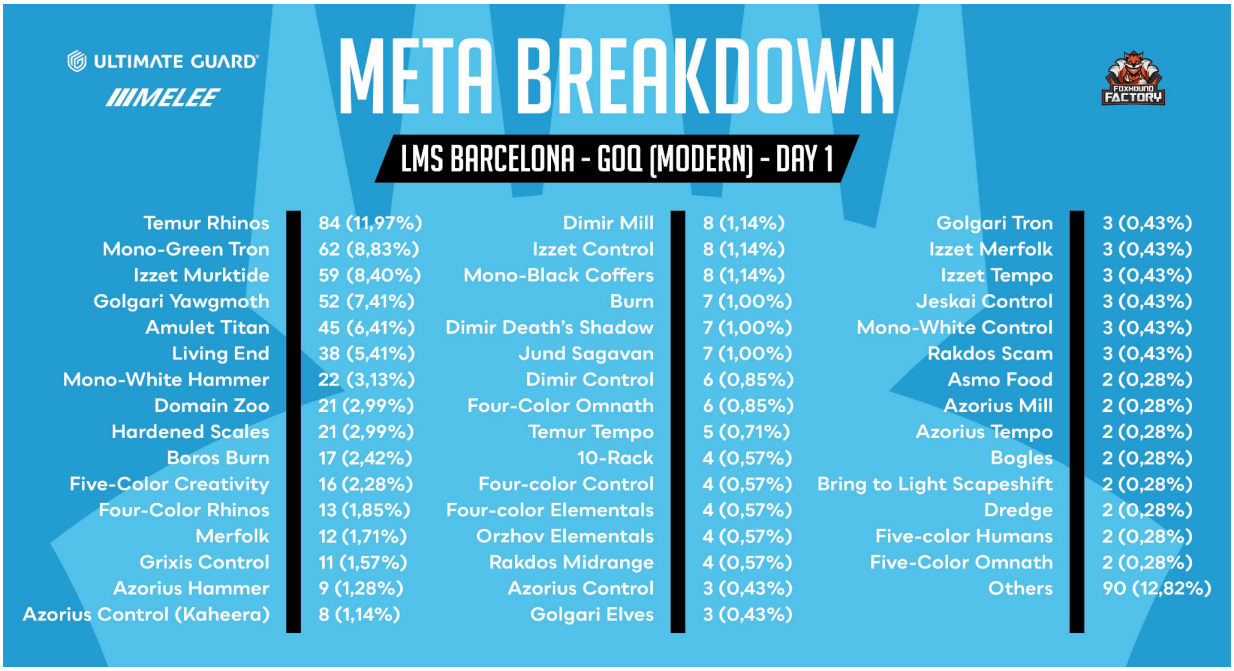
In December 2023, **Fury and Up the Beanstalk were banned.** Merfolk seems like it could be well-positioned in the new, rapidly-developing metagame!

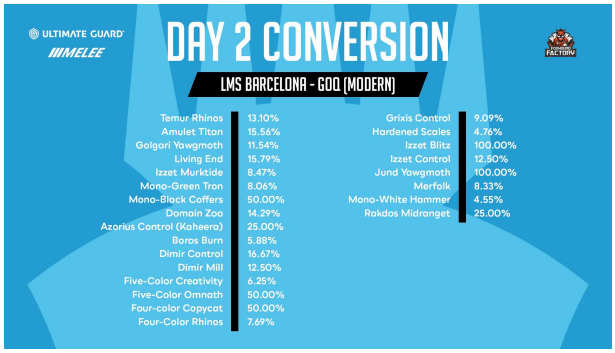
To learn about the history of Merfolk in the Extended format (before the existence of Modern), and for more on Merfolk history in Standard, Legacy, and Vintage, check out this great **video**!

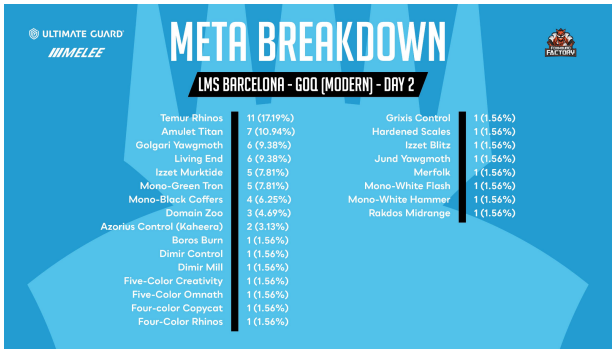
See Chapter 3, below, for current sample decklists to see what all this history has led up to today.

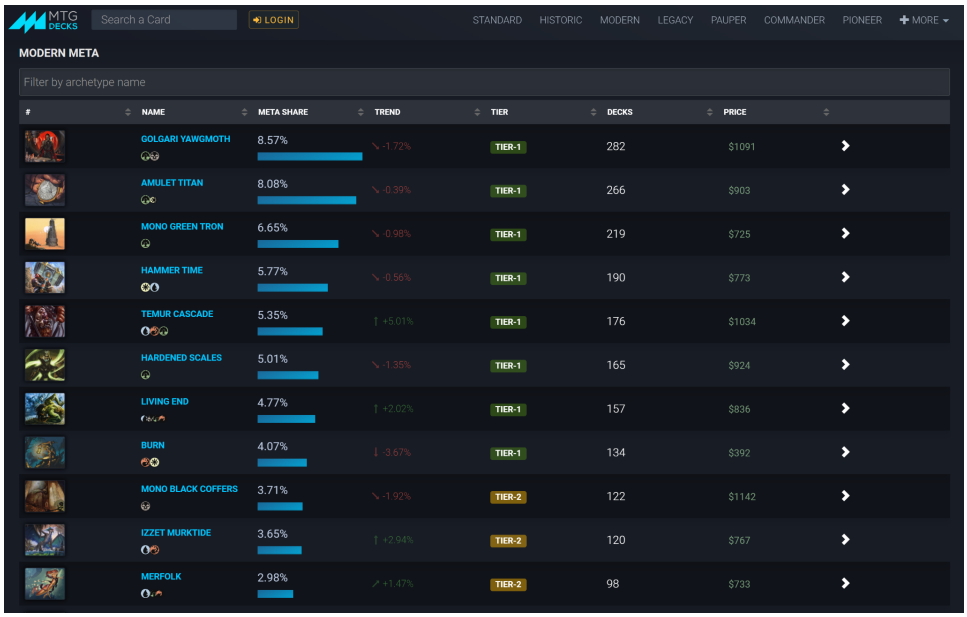
STATE OF THE DECK

With the December 2023 Fury and Beanstalk bans, **the Modern metagame is in flux.** In late November, just before the bans, a Merfolk player made Top 8 in a large **Japanese tournament.** In early December, a week after the bans, there was a huge Modern tournament in Barcelona. It was very exciting seeing decks vie to become the new top dog in the format. Out of 702 players, 12 people registered to play Mono-Blue Merfolk, and 3 people were on Izzet Merfolk. **One Merfolk pilot made it to Day 2** (with a very unique Mono-Blue **decklist**), which puts Mono-Blue's Day 2 conversion rate at 8.33%, more than Mono-Green Tron, Burn, Creativity, 4c Rhinos, Hardened Scales, or Mono-White Hammer! Our metagame share (as represented on various tracking websites) has been steadily on the upswing, with Merfolk fighting other strong decks near the top of Tier 2, trying to crack into Tier 1.





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MONO GREEN TRON 6.65% -0.98% TIER-1 219 $725
HAMMER TIME 5.77% -0.56% TIER-1 190 $773
TEMUR CASCADE 5.35% +5.01% TIER-1 176 $1034
HARDENED SCALES 5.01% -1.35% TIER-1 165 $924
LIVING END 4.77% +2.02% TIER-1 157 $836
BURN 4.07% -3.67% TIER-1 134 $392
MONO BLACK COFFERS 3.71% -1.92% TIER-2 122 $1142
IZZET MURKTIDE 3.65% +2.94% TIER-2 120 $767
MERFOLK 2.98% +1.47% TIER-2 98 $733

As for the current composition of the deck itself, please see Chapter 3, below. But here are some big-picture observations on the state of the deck:

- **Islandwalk lords are still an essential part of the deck,** but are beginning to be trimmed in order to make space for more interactive and/or value-oriented cards.

- **There has been a hard move towards excluding cards with one toughness from the deck.** Most notably, this includes a card previously believed by many to be the single-best card in the entire deck for many years: Silvergill Adept. A string of new cards (Plague Engineer, Wrenn and Six, Orcish Bowmasters) that punish x/1 creatures simply makes it too risky to play them any longer. (Note, some brave pilots still play Silvergill Adept, but they are a small minority.)

- The relatively recent additions of Merfolk cards like **Vodalian Hexcatcher and Tishana's Tidebinder have, in a general sense, pushed our non-Merfolk interactive cards to the sideboard.** Whereas Dismember, Force of Negation, and Subtlety could previously be found side-by-side in the Merfolk main deck a year ago, our tribal deck can now have a far higher density of actual Merfolk in the main deck.

    - The blue "free" spells are still very powerful, but can be poor in some situations (whereas Merfolk with situationally-irrelevant interaction stapled to them can still at least attack the opponent). From the sideboard, **Force of Negation can be brought in against spell-heavy decks** like Burn, Creativity, and Living End (and left out for creature-heavy matchups). **Subtlety can be brought in against creature and planeswalker decks** like Titan, Omnath Control, and Tron. (For more on sideboarding strategy, please see Chapter 13.)

    - **Dismember is perhaps the least situational of these three cards, and is still seen in more main decks than the other two.** While a full playset in the main was very common to see in the past, it is more often seen today as some split between main and side.

- **Deeproot Pilgrimage is a contentious inclusion in the main deck.** Results are fairly evenly split between lists with the card, and lists without the card. Time will tell whether Pilgrimage will establish itself as a "core" main deck inclusion, or not.

TIER ONE HISTORY

Merfolk has enjoyed periods in the past at the very top of the Modern format. According to mtgdecks.net, Merfolk was **tier one** in November and December of 2022. Additionally, Merfolk was tier one for several months in 2015 and 2016, according to the website *Modern Nexus* (now known as *Quiet Speculation*), which published monthly analyses of metagame data. Links to the format discussion and data from these months are below.

Modern Merfolk was tier one for four months in 2015: **July**, **August**, **September**, and **October**
Modern Merfolk was tier one for three months in 2016: **June**, **July**, and **August**
Modern Merfolk was tier one for two months in 2022: **November** and **December**

HISTORIC PERFORMANCES

Modern Merfolk pilots have achieved some remarkable results, from the early days of Modern to today. Below you will find a list of Merfolk's significant results from top-level events, in chronological order. It is interesting to observe how these winning decklists have evolved over the years (click the pilots' names to see their lists). Many of the events have links to videos - be sure to check them out!

DATE	**EVENT**	**PLAYERS**	**PILOT** (LINKS TO LISTS)	**FINISH**	**VIDEO**
Oct 2012	Pro Tour Return to Ravnica	382	**Satoshi Yamaguchi**	Top 16	
Oct 2012	Pro Tour Return to Ravnica	382	**Michael Majors**	Top 32	
Feb 2014	Pro Tour Born of the Gods	393	**Petr Sochurek**	Top 16	
Jan 2015	Grand Prix Omaha	1168	**Jon Paton**	Top 4	**VIDEO**
Jun 2015	SCG Invitational Columbus	663	**Richard Adams**	Top 4	**VIDEO**
Jun 2015	Grand Prix Copenhagen	1345	**Przemek Knocinski**	🔱WINNER🔱	**VIDEO**
Jun 2015	Grand Prix Copenhagen	1345	**Christoffer Larsen**	Top 4	**VIDEO**
Aug 2015	Modern Open Charlotte	509	**Hunter Nance**	2nd Place	**VIDEO**
Sep 2015	Grand Prix Oklahoma City	1491	**Paul Rietzl**	Top 8	**VIDEO**
May 2016	Grand Prix Los Angeles	2239	**Simon Slutsky**	🔱WINNER🔱	**VIDEO**
May 2016	Grand Prix Los Angeles	2239	**Valerion Lee**	Top 16	
Feb 2017	Grand Prix Vancouver	1645	**Jonathon Zaczek (Nikachu)**	2nd Place	**VIDEO**
Jan 2018	SCG Classic Philadelphia	325	**Roland Rivera**	Top 16	
Apr 2019	MagicFest Yokohama	312	**Shiota Akihiko**	Top 4	
Sep 2019	SCG Open Dallas	500	**Sherwin Lakhmani**	Top 32	
Oct 2022	Magic30 Las Vegas	896	**Jonathan Zaczek (Nikachu)**	🔱Top 8🔱	**VIDEO**
Oct 2022	Magic30 Las Vegas	896	**Jon Paton**	🔱Top 8🔱	
Dec 2022	Modern Main Event Bologna	484	**Dario Casati**	Top 8	
Dec 2022	Modern Main Event Bologna	484	**Mike Boulinguiez**	Top 8	
Jan 2023	Grand Open Qualifier Trieste	396	**Michele Bandera**	2nd place	**VIDEO**
Mar 2023	BIG MAGIC Players Open	748	**Yosuke Mochizuki**	Top 8	
Nov 2023	The 25th God of Modern	181	**Fujino Yoshitaka**	Top 8	
Dec 2023	Grand Open Qualifier Barcelona	702	**Lluis Restoy**	17th place	**VIDEO**

CHAPTER 3: *How the Deck is Built*

SAMPLE DECKLISTS

The two decklists below demonstrate the diversity of approaches that are possible in Modern Merfolk while still maintaining the deck's core components. These lists show off the power of our new cards: both feature Tishana's Tidebinder as a full playset, while only one is experimenting with Deeproot Pilgrimage. There has never been a "definitive" Mono-Blue Modern Merfolk list, but these two are good starting points.

SomeborY
December 2023 (**5th Place, Modern Challenge**)

CREATURES (31)
4 Rishadan Dockhand
4 Tide Shaper
3 Lord of Atlantis
4 Master of the Pearl Trident
4 Vodalian Hexcatcher
4 Merfolk Trickster
4 Svyelun of Sea and Sky
4 Tishana's Tidebinder

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Mooshack
December 2023 (**Modern League 5-0**)

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3 Cursed Totem
3 Subtlety
2 Chalice of the Void
2 Spreading Seas
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2 Kira, Great Glass-Spinner
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CORE SPELLS

Modern Merfolk has a **well-established, proven core** made up of the cards listed below. These are cards that should virtually always be included in the main deck, in any metagame. Most of these important cards have **dedicated chapters** later in this primer to expand upon strategic considerations specific to each of them.

Lord of Atlantis
Creature — Merfolk
Other Merfolk get +1/+1 and have islandwalk. (They can't be blocked as long as defending player controls an Island.)
2/2

Lord of Atlantis
The original Merfolk "lord" from way back in Alpha! Note that this card differs from Master of the Pearl Trident only in that it gives all "other Merfolk" +1/+1 and Islandwalk; this includes any Merfolk your opponent may control, so use caution!

Master of the Pearl Trident
Creature — Merfolk
Other Merfolk creatures you control get +1/+1 and have islandwalk. (They can't be blocked as long as defending player controls an Island.)
"Let the land dwellers know the coast is no longer the border between our realms. A new age of empire has begun."
Illus. Ryan Pancoast
2/2

Master of the Pearl Trident
Our second Islandwalk lord (this time the ability affects only creatures we control). Growing our creatures and making them unblockable is a core part of Modern Merfolk strategy, and these two creatures do both those things.

Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its controller pays .
1/1

Vodalian Hexcatcher
The third lord, and the most unique. In general, flash is a wildly valuable ability in Modern Merfolk, letting us respond more accurately to our opponent. The counter ability provides the deck powerful interaction without reducing our creature count.

Merfolk Trickster
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Merfolk Trickster enters the battlefield, tap target creature an opponent controls. It loses all abilities until end of turn.
Saved from destruction by one planeswalker's sacrifice, the Eliterate colony forswore the taking of life.
2/2

Merfolk Trickster
A very flexible creature in the deck, and deceptively powerful; there are a number of popular creatures in Modern that Trickster simply dominates, such as Dragon's Rage Channeler and Construct Tokens. See Chapter 8 to learn more about this tricky card.

Svyelun of Sea and Sky
Legendary Creature — Merfolk God
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card.
Other Merfolk you control have ward .
(Whenever another Merfolk you control becomes the target of a spell or ability an opponent controls, counter it unless that player pays .)
Illus. Seb McKinnon
3/4

Svyelun of Sea and Sky
Svyelun attacks well, blocks well, protects our other creatures, and draws cards. Though legendary, we run all four copies to increase our odds of drawing the first copy; she can dominate games, and can claw us back from seemingly unwinnable positions!

Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, that permanent loses all abilities for as long as Tishana's Tidebinder remains on the battlefield. (Mana abilities can't be targeted.)
3/2

Tishana's Tidebinder
Tidebinder is one of the best blue creatures ever printed… and it happens to be a Merfolk! Its "stifle" ability is relevant in nearly every matchup, and can often be devastating. The 3/2 flash body can surprise opponents, particularly alongside Islandwalk lords.

Tide Shaper
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Kicker (You may pay an additional as you cast this spell.)
When Tide Shaper enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, target land becomes an Island for as long as Tide Shaper remains on the battlefield.
Tide Shaper gets +1/+1 as long as an opponent controls an Island.
1/1

Tide Shaper
Merfolk's best 1-drop option by far. If playing against an opponent with Islands, Shaper is automatically a 2/2, which is excellent. In addition to providing access to Islandwalk, Shaper's ability can disrupt the opponent's mana (and destroy Urza's Sagas!).

Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal to the number of charge counters on Aether Vial from your hand onto the battlefield.

Aether Vial
This little artifact turbo charges Merfolk's tempo game plan! When played on turn one, Vial can essentially double the pace of our development. In addition, it allows us to play any of our creatures at instant speed, for increased flexibility and impact.

CORE LANDS

As a mono-color deck, Modern Merfolk gets to play a robust and resilient **manabase**. We play more basic lands than virtually any other competitive deck in the format, and take very little damage from our lands. A number of powerful non-basics round out our land choices, as listed below.

Basic Island
With simple blue and generic mana costs throughout the deck, Merfolk is able to run a great number of basic lands. This has upsides, such as not costing us life (like fetchlands and shocklands would), and avoiding being punished by cards like Blood Moon.

Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Some worlds possess a hidden core where life's essence constantly surges.

Mutavault
Mutavault has always been excellent in Modern Merfolk, but, with some of our newer synergies (Hexcatcher, Svyelun, and Deeproot Pilgrimage), this strong manland has reached a new level of importance in the deck. Be sure to read Chapter 12 to learn more about Mutavault!

Cavern of Souls
Land
As Cavern of Souls enters the battlefield, choose a creature type.
: Add .
: Add one mana of any color. Spend this mana only to cast a creature spell of the chosen type, and that spell can't be countered.

Cavern of Souls
Tribal decks have always had a hard time in the Modern format, with all its efficient removal spells and sweepers. Cavern of Souls is a wonderful reward for playing a tribal strategy; it is a huge trump card against any deck with countermagic.

Otawara, Soaring City
Legendary Land
: Add .
Channel — , Discard Otawara, Soaring City: Return target artifact, creature, enchantment, or planeswalker to its owner's hand. This ability costs less to activate for each legendary creature you control.

Otawara, Soaring City
Bounce effects have long been relevant in tempo strategies; slowing down the opponent as we continue to attack is plan A! The printing of Otawara (an untapped blue source that can be used as a bounce spell when needed) was a gift to Modern Merfolk.

Minamo, School at Water's Edge
Legendary Land
: Add .
, : Untap target legendary permanent.
Its students graduate the school and enter history.
Jeremy Jarvis

Minamo, School at Water's Edge
This legendary land was originally included in Modern Merfolk simply as a non-basic blue source, attempting to avoid getting blown out by cards like Choke. However, Minamo can now be used to untap Svyelun to block after she attacks!

Waterlogged Grove
Land
, Pay 1 life: Add or .
, , Sacrifice Waterlogged Grove: Draw a card.
The trees pull water from deep underground, filling the forest for miles.

Waterlogged Grove
Though we enjoy our mono-color, generally painless manabase, the inclusion of one or two "canopy" lands such as Waterlogged Grove and/or Fiery Islet adds much-needed card draw to the deck without introducing an excessive amount of life loss.

FLEX CARDS

Because our core cards do not make up a complete sixty-card main deck, the remaining slots have more flexibility. These choices are generally made based upon a mixture of metagame considerations and personal preference. Below is a list of **top choices** for these flex slots. All of these cards are common main deck inclusions, but many can also frequently be found in the sideboard.

Deeproot Pilgrimage
Enchantment
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
"These glyphs are more than trail markings! They tell a story as they go. But does it end in celebration or tragedy?"

Deeproot Pilgrimage
Pilgrimage is a strong new card fighting for its spot in the core of Modern Merfolk. It has many synergies with existing cards, and is incredible against any midrange or control deck. If this sounds like your meta, Pilgrimage should be a 4-of in your main deck.

Rishadan Dockhand
Creature — Merfolk
Islandwalk (This creature can't be blocked as long as defending player controls an Island.)
: Tap target land.
It's not hard to find work in Rishada, so long as you've got a strong back and don't ask too many questions.
Illus. Manuel Castañón
1/2

Rishadan Dockhand
When played alongside Deeproot Pilgrimage, Dockhand becomes massively more potent. A 1/2 Islandwalker that can tap a land is passable - but if it makes a 1/1 hexproof merfolk token while doing so, it transforms into a real menace for opponents!

Smuggler's Copter
Artifact — Vehicle
Flying
Whenever Smuggler's Copter attacks or blocks, you may draw a card. If you do, discard a card.
Crew 1 (Tap any number of creatures you control with total power 1 or more: This Vehicle becomes an artifact creature until end of turn.)
3/3

Smuggler's Copter
As with Rishadan Dockhand, Smuggler's Copter has suddenly become much stronger with the introduction of Deeproot Pilgrimage. With Copter on board, all our non-token Merfolk can be tapped (even with summoning sickness) to crew and make a hexproof token.

Mothdust Changeling
Creature — Shapeshifter
Changeling (This card is every creature type.)
Tap an untapped creature you control: Mothdust Changeling gains flying until end of turn.
"Ever seen a changeling fly into a lantern?" —Calydd, kithkin farmer
1/1

Mothdust Changeling
Yet another card whose stock has risen as a result of Pilgrimage. Mothdust Changeling plays a similar role to Copter: it allows us to tap as many creatures as we want, whenever we want, to make tokens. However, it is a risky inclusion given its one point of toughness.

Subtlety
Creature — Elemental Incarnation
Flash
Flying
When Subtlety enters the battlefield, choose up to one target creature spell or planeswalker spell. Its owner puts it on the top or bottom of their library.
Evoke—Exile a blue card from your hand.
3/3

Subtlety
"Free" spells fit the tempo game plan perfectly. As we deploy creatures with our mana, Subtlety can be Evoked (by pitching a blue card) to slow down the opponent. When cast for four mana later in the game, we also get a 3/3 flying body to help close the game.

Force of Negation
Instant
If it's not your turn, you may exile a blue card from your hand rather than pay this spell's mana cost.
Counter target noncreature spell. If that spell is countered this way, exile it instead of putting it into its owner's graveyard.
"Try, if you must."
Illus. Paul Scott Canavan

Force of Negation
As with Subtlety, Force derives its power from a "free" casting cost. Prior to its printing, we often had to choose between leaving up mana for countermagic or developing our board. Force of Negation allows us to do both of these essential things at once.

Dismember
Instant
(Φ can be paid with either Φ or 2 life.)
Target creature gets -5/-5 until end of turn.
"You serve Phyrexia. Your pieces would better serve Phyrexia elsewhere."
—Azax-Azog, the Demon Thane

Dismember
As a mono-blue deck, we are fortunate to have access to a great removal spell like Dismember! It protects against many dangerous threats in Modern for the low cost of just one mana (and four life). Occasionally uncastable, but still very much worth playing.

Spreading Seas
Enchantment — Aura
Enchant land
When Spreading Seas enters the battlefield, draw a card.
Enchanted land is an Island.
Most inhabitants of Zendikar have given up on the idea of an accurate map.

Spreading Seas
For Islandwalk to do anything, we need the opponent to control at least one Island. Spreading Seas was, for many years, a core part of Modern Merfolk for this reason. Today, however, it sees more play in sideboards as an additional way to destroy Urza's Sagas.

Fish Facts

During one of the darkest times in Modern's history, **Eldrazi Winter** (Jan-Apr 2016), Merfolk actually did well in the metagame... because of **Spreading Seas!** The Eldrazi Aggro decks dominating the format then relied on their powerful lands, and we turned those lands to Islands. In fact, Spreading Seas was so strong that UW Control began playing it - here is a **UW list** from then. Look at all the Eldrazi decks in the Top 8!

Harbinger of the Tides
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
You may cast Harbinger of the Tides as though it had flash if you pay 2 more to cast it. (You may cast it any time you could cast an instant.)
When Harbinger of the Tides enters the battlefield, you may return target tapped creature an opponent controls to its owner's hand.
2/2

Harbinger of the Tides
Harbinger was once a part of the Merfolk core, and saw a resurgence of interest in 2022. Played in the main deck or sideboard, it is primarily included as a way to bounce large, scary creatures while increasing our Merfolk count. Far better when used with Aether Vial!

Kira, Great Glass-Spinner
Legendary Creature — Spirit
Flying
Creatures you control have "Whenever this creature becomes the target of a spell or ability for the first time each turn, counter that spell or ability."
Each spell is an intricate tapestry, and Kira is the great unraveler.
2/2

Kira, Great Glass-Spinner
In years past, Modern was a slower format and Kira provided reliable protection for our team. It now sees far less play because (a) Svyelun provides some protection, and (b) Svyelun and Hexcatcher demand we play more Merfolk.

Glasspool Mimic
Creature - Shapeshifter Rogue
You may have Glasspool Mimic enter the battlefield as a copy of a creature you control, except it's a Shapeshifter Rogue in addition to its other types.
Land
0/0

Glasspool Mimic
Glasspool Mimic is a somewhat divisive card among Merfolk players. One side argues that taplands are bad, and the other argues that extra creatures are good. One thing that can be said definitively is Mimic is better in lists with more 3-drops, to make better use of Vial.

Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
Legendary Land
: Add .
: Return Oboro, Palace in the Clouds to its owner's hand.
Here the soratami wove their endless plots—graceful, artful, and deceitful, while the unwitting world moved below.

Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
Like Minamo, Oboro was mainly introduced to the deck as a hedge against Choke. Though it can do some tricky things (like make two blue mana with Mutavault), Oboro is now often excluded in favor of the "core" lands featured above.

Sea Gate Restoration
Sorcery
Draw cards equal to the number of cards in your hand plus one. You have no maximum hand size for the rest of the game.
"We have much to remember . . . and much we can never forget."
—Tazri
Land
: Add .

Sea Gate Restoration
This dual-faced card was not immediately on any Merfolk players' radars, but eventually began seeing some play as an untapped land (for 3 life) that, as a blue card, can be pitched to cast Force or Subtlety. Pretty techy; most pilots just prefer to run another basic Island.

Lórien Revealed
Sorcery
Draw three cards.
Islandcycling (, Discard this card: Search your library for an Island card, reveal it, put it into your hand, then shuffle.)
"Look on us now with friendly eyes! Behold the trees of the Naith of Lórien and be glad!"
—Haldir

Lórien Revealed
Very similar to Sea Gate Restoration in terms of why it might be played, but has advantages (doesn't cost life; is cheaper to actually cast the spell side) and disadvantages (can't be played if it's the only "land" in our opening hand; in effect it costs 1 to play as a land).

Phantasmal Image
Creature — Illusion
You may have Phantasmal Image enter the battlefield as a copy of any creature on the battlefield, except it's an Illusion in addition to its other types and it has "When this creature becomes the target of a spell or ability, sacrifice it."
0/0

Phantasmal Image
Modern is full of strong creatures, many with powerful ETB effects. Phantasmal Image is a well-costed way to copy an 8-drop on the other side of the table, or just one of our own Merfolk. Image has gotten significantly worse since the printing of Orcish Bowmasters.

Sea's Claim
Enchantment — Aura
Enchant land (Target a land as you cast this. This card enters the battlefield attached to that land.)
Enchanted land is an Island.
"My vengeance will drown my enemies as my storms drown the desert."
—Ixidor, reality sculptor
Illus. Alan Pollack

Sea's Claim
A poor substitute for Spreading Seas. But if your plan is to make as many lands as possible into Islands, this card can be played in addition to Spreading Seas. Sea's Claim used to be better when Master of Waves was playable, as it adds blue devotion to the board.

SIDEBOARD CARDS

Below is a list of popular card choices that typically only see play in the sideboard, generally due to the narrowness of their application. However, if the metagame ever shifts hard in a particular direction, many of these cards can become clever main deck inclusions to gain an advantage against the field. This list is *not* comprehensive; these are only some of the most popular choices.

Thieving Skydiver
Creature — Merfolk Rogue
Kicker. X can't be 0. (You may pay an additional as you cast this spell.)
Flying
When Thieving Skydiver enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, gain control of target artifact with mana value X or less. If that artifact is an Equipment, attach it to Thieving Skydiver.
2/1

Thieving Skydiver
Since the minimum kicker is one, this card needs to be cast for at least three mana to get any value - a tad clunky against the aggressive artifact matchups we want it for. When the ETB works, though, it can be incredible!

Orvar, the All-Form
Legendary Creature — Shapeshifter
Changeling
Whenever you cast an instant or sorcery spell, if it targets one or more other permanents you control, create a token that's a copy of one of those permanents.
When a spell or ability an opponent controls causes you to discard this card, create a token that's a copy of target permanent.
3/3

Orvar, the All-Form
Specific tech for playing against Archon of Cruelty (most commonly seen in the popular Creativity deck). When Archon makes us discard, we pitch Orvar and copy the Archon. Oh how the tables have turned!

Spell Pierce
Instant
Counter target noncreature spell unless its controller pays 2.
"There's a hole in your plan."
—Noyan Dar, Tazeem lullmage

Spell Pierce
In the past, Pierce would have been included in "Flex Cards;" it saw wide main deck play as an efficient way to stop spells. Today, it has largely been replaced by Force of Negation, though it is still a very solid sideboard choice.

Mystical Dispute
Instant
This spell costs 2 less to cast if it targets a blue spell.
Counter target spell unless its controller pays 3.
"Poor, lost mage. Your feet are on land, yet you're in over your head, aren't you?"

Mystical Dispute
Dispute is a hugely powerful spell against blue decks. Additionally, it can be brought in against various non-blue decks as a "bad Mana Leak," just to have extra ways to fight against big, important spells.

Mana Leak
Instant
Counter target spell unless its controller pays 3.
The fatal flaw in every plan is the assumption that you know more than your enemy.

Mana Leak
With every deck in Modern trying to use their mana as efficiently as possible at all times, it is very easy to catch opponents with Mana Leak. Effectively Counterspell with an easier casting cost in most spots.

Mistcaller
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Sacrifice Mistcaller: Until end of turn, if a nontoken creature would enter the battlefield and it wasn't cast, exile it instead.
Hospitality is of little concern to those who do not wish to be disturbed.
1/1

Mistcaller
Once written off as unplayable, Mistcaller has come to be respected in a Modern format featuring an ever-increasing number of ways for players to cheat creatures into play. As a 1-drop, it also helps us present an aggressive clock.

Brazen Borrower
Petty Theft is a versatile effect, and the flying body is great. However, Borrower's one point of toughness is very weak to many threats. Additionally, with the printing of Hexcatcher, we want to play more actual Merfolk cards for synergy purposes.

Counterspell
Instant
Counter target spell.
"One need not know the specific details of a spell to suppress its effect. Simply rearrange the rules of the reality within which the spell operates."
—Imbraham, Quandrix dean

Counterspell
The original Counterspell from Alpha, finally playable in Modern with the printing of Modern Horizons 2 in 2021. Though very strong, the UU casting cost is generally prohibitive in Modern Merfolk due to playsets of Mutavault and Cavern of Souls.

Flusterstorm
Instant
Counter target instant or sorcery spell unless its controller pays 1.
Storm (When you cast this spell, copy it for each spell cast before it this turn. You may choose new targets for the copies.)

Flusterstorm
Though narrow (only hitting instants and sorceries), this card is strong against Cascade strategies, where it will always make at least two copies (for a total tax of three mana). It also plays through Chalice on 1, and wins counterspell wars!

Annul
Instant
Counter target artifact or enchantment spell.
The most effective way to destroy a spell is to ensure it was never cast in the first place.
Illus. Greg Simanson

Annul
This excellent spell casts an impressively wide net for such a small casting cost. It hits enchantments like Leyline Binding and Fable of the Mirror-Breaker, as well as artifact spells in decks like Hardened Scales, Hammer Time, and Tron.

Stern Scolding
Instant
Counter target creature spell with power or toughness 2 or less.
"Fool of a Took! This is a serious journey, not a Hobbit walking-party. Throw yourself in next time, and then you will be no further nuisance. Now be quiet!"

Stern Scolding

An extremely versatile and well-costed counterspell, Scolding hits creatures in a wide variety of matchups, from Yawgmoth to Hammer Time to Scales to Murktide, and more. Fool of a Took!

Unlicensed Hearse
Artifact — Vehicle
: Exile up to two target cards from a single graveyard.
Unlicensed Hearse's power and toughness are each equal to the number of cards exiled with it.
Crew 2

Unlicensed Hearse

Hearse is great against decks concerned with specific cards in the yard, such as Reanimator and Scam, but also solid against any deck using the graveyard in any way. It synergizes with Pilgrimage, and can become a big threat itself!

Relic of Progenitus
Artifact
: Target player exiles a card from their graveyard.
, Exile Relic of Progenitus: Exile all graveyards. Draw a card.
Elves believe the hydra-god Progenitus sleeps beneath Naya, feeding on forgotten magics.

Relic of Progenitus

A full playset of Relics was once a very common starting point for our sideboards. It does a lot for a little, and there will always be decks in Modern looking to abuse the graveyard. It even replaces itself by drawing a card!

Stone of Erech
Legendary Artifact
If a creature an opponent controls would die, exile it instead.
, , Sacrifice Stone of Erech: Exile target player's graveyard. Draw a card.
"At the Stone of Erech they shall stand again and hear there a horn in the hills ringing."
—Malbeth the Seer

Stone of Erech

This is an excellent, relatively new graveyard hate spell. If played turn 1 on the play, it can shut down Scam's best line, and be a big problem for Living End. Its draw ability is more expensive than Relic's, and only exiles one player's graveyard.

Pithing Needle
Artifact
As Pithing Needle enters the battlefield, choose a card name.
Activated abilities of sources with the chosen name can't be activated unless they're mana abilities.

Pithing Needle

Modern is full of cards with powerful activated abilities, from artifacts to planeswalkers to creatures to lands. For the low price of one mana, Needle can shut off the most threatening card in a matchup, making it a strong, versatile sideboard pick.

Phyrexian Revoker
Artifact Creature — Phyrexian Horror
As Phyrexian Revoker enters the battlefield, choose a nonland card name.
Activated abilities of sources with the chosen name can't be activated.
Basic senses like sight and taste are reserved for those in power.
2/1

Phyrexian Revoker

A similar effect to Pithing Needle, but on a body. More fragile, but can also attack! In addition, Revoker can stop mana abilities (but can't name lands)! Vialing in Revoker with a planeswalker on the stack is a great feeling!

Chalice of the Void
Artifact
Chalice of the Void enters the battlefield with X charge counters on it.
Whenever a player casts a spell with mana value equal to the number of charge counters on Chalice of the Void, counter that spell.

Chalice of the Void

Though typically played in the sideboard, some players enjoy this card enough to run it in the main. As the format becomes ever more efficient with 0 and 1 mana spells, Chalice's stock rises. Cavern of Souls helps us play through it!

Void Mirror

With "free" spells becoming more prevalent in Modern, Void Mirror is well-positioned. It counters things like Evoke elementals and Cascade spells, as well as any other spell cast with only colorless mana (think: Tron, artifact decks).

Cursed Totem
Artifact
Activated abilities of creatures can't be activated.
"Sorry, Great One, but did I hear correctly? I'm to entrust this powerful artifact to our worst researchers?"
—Flesdrim, Cabal servant

Cursed Totem

Some decks, such as Yawgmoth and Hardened Scales, lean heavily on activated abilities of creatures. If you expect a lot of these kinds of matchups in your metagame, Totem is a perfect sideboard choice.

Damping Sphere
Artifact
If a land is tapped for two or more mana, it produces instead of any other type and amount.
Each spell a player casts costs more to cast for each other spell that player has cast this turn.
A Thran relic, it has spent ten thousand years doing absolutely nothing.

Damping Sphere

This card targets a very clear subset of decks: those playing lands making more than one mana each, and those trying to cast lots of spells. Bring Sphere in against things like Tron, Amulet Titan, Breach, and any Storm deck.

Ratchet Bomb
Artifact
: Put a charge counter on Ratchet Bomb.
, Sacrifice Ratchet Bomb: Destroy each nonland permanent with mana value equal to the number of charge counters on Ratchet Bomb.

Ratchet Bomb
Ratchet Bomb is best at wiping away a board of tokens. This is most relevant today against Rhinos and Creativity. It can also deal with troublesome 1-drops, but we have to wait a turn. It can go higher, as well, but don't wipe your own board accidentally!

Engineered Explosives
Artifact
Sunburst (This enters the battlefield with a charge counter on it for each color of mana spent to cast it.)
, Sacrifice Engineered Explosives: Destroy each nonland permanent with mana value equal to the number of charge counters on Engineered Explosives.

Engineered Explosives
Explosives kills tokens for the same mana and tempo as Ratchet Bomb. It has the upside of being able to kill 1-drops right away (for three mana), but it can never go higher than 1mv with our mono-blue manabase.

Spellskite
Artifact Creature — Phyrexian Horror
: Change a target of target spell or ability to Spellskite. (can be paid with either or 2 life.)
"Let's show Vorinclex that progress doesn't always need teeth or claws."
—Malcator, Executor of Synthesis
0/4

Spellskite
A more popular choice in the past, but still a great card to reach for when things like Bogles and Infect increase in the meta. Spellskite is a solid blocker and provides protection for our creatures. Like Revoker, it can be a blowout with Aether Vial!

Grafdigger's Cage
Artifact
Creature cards in graveyards and libraries can't enter the battlefield.
Players can't cast spells from graveyards or libraries.
"If you wind up in one of mine, you can be sure as silver it will be your last."
—Grafdigger Wulmer

Grafdigger's Cage
Cage is a powerful card, but it is important to know what it can and can't stop. For example, it stops things like Undying, Persist, and Chord of Calling, but does nothing against Living End and Creativity. Use it wisely!

Fading Hope
Instant
Return target creature to its owner's hand. If its mana value was 3 or less, scry 1. (Look at the top card of your library. You may put that card on the bottom of your library.)
"At least I won't become one of . . . those things."

Fading Hope
As mentioned with Otawara, Harbinger, and Brazen Borrower, bounce effects are always relevant. Fading Hope is a strong choice, allowing us to bounce an opposing creature or our own, often allowing us to scry 1 in the process.

Slip Out the Back
Instant
Put a +1/+1 counter on target creature. It phases out. (Treat it and anything attached to it as though they don't exist until its controller's next turn.)
"I was never here."

Slip Out the Back
This card is In the same family as Fading Hope - it can save one of our creatures or delay an opponent's. Slip Out the Back has the benefit (or, in the case of using it against an opposing creature, the drawback) of not requiring the controller to recast.

Hurkyl's Recall
Instant
Return all artifacts target player owns to their hand.
Hurkyl's research at the College of Lat-Nam wasn't enough to stop the two brothers, but for centuries thereafter her spellcraft taught artificers restraint.

Hurkyl's Recall
Often the nuts against any artifact deck, Recall ideally sets the opponent back several turns for the low cost of just two mana. If the opponent happens to play artifact lands, this card pretty much wins on the spot.

Echoing Truth
Instant
Return target nonland permanent and all other permanents with the same name as that permanent to their owners' hands.
A single lie unleashes a tide of disbelief.

Echoing Truth
This is such a versatile spell that it is rarely a poor inclusion. Capable of saving our creatures (occasionally in multiples), or bouncing troublesome opposing permanents (occasionally in multiples). Great against tokens!

Gut Shot
Instant
(can be paid with either or 2 life.)
Gut Shot deals 1 damage to any target.
"Down here, we have a more pointed version of the scriptures."
—Urabrask's enforcer

Gut Shot
Phyrexian mana is very powerful! Gut shot is narrow, but hits many important early-game threats, from Ragavan to mana dorks, without missing a beat, tempo-wise. It can also finish an opponent at one life!

Surgical Extraction
Instant
(can be paid with either or 2 life.)
Choose target card in a graveyard other than a basic land card. Search its owner's graveyard, hand, and library for any number of cards with the same name as that card and exile them. Then that player shuffles.

Surgical Extraction
If we counter a big combo spell, Surgical Extraction can pick all the remaining copies out of the opponent's graveyard, hand, and library. As it requires the spell to already be in the graveyard, this is generally not a card we look to play.

MAYBEBOARD CARDS

Beyond all the cards listed in this chapter so far, there are many, many other solid cards that Modern Merfolk has played in the past, and could possibly play again in the future. In general, there are good reasons these cards are not currently seeing play. However, if one of these cards seems powerful and interesting to you, please bring it up for discussion on the **FishMTG** Discord server!

Preordain
Sorcery
Scry 2, then draw a card. (To scry 2, look at the top two cards of your library, then put any number of them on the bottom and the rest on top in any order.)

Preordain
Unbanned in August 2023, Preordain was played extensively and to good initial results in Modern Merfolk. However, it can be a liability with Orcish Bowmasters being one of the top creatures in the format.

Intruder Alarm
Enchantment
Creatures don't untap during their controllers' untap steps.
Whenever a creature enters the battlefield, untap all creatures.
Mirri was startled by Vohrath's apparition—it had no scent.
Illus. Donato Giancola

Intruder Alarm
This card can create infinite tokens alongside Deeproot Pilgrimage and Mutavault (or something like Smuggler's Copter or Mothdust Changeling). But it is very weak on its own, and so is rather risky to include.

Merrow Reejerey
Creature — Merfolk Soldier
Other Merfolk creatures you control get +1/+1.
Whenever you cast a Merfolk spell, you may tap or untap target permanent.
Steady and silent as the deep current, the reejerey guides the course of the school.
2/2

Merrow Reejerey
Once a frequent main deck inclusion, Merrow Reejerey is generally considered too fragile to risk three mana on, despite his unique ability being very powerful. Reejerey is, however, a core part of Simic Sprawlfolk (see Chapter 16).

Silvergill Adept
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
As an additional cost to cast this spell, reveal a Merfolk card from your hand or pay 3.
When Silvergill Adept enters the battlefield, draw a card.
"I bring baubles of lore, lost secrets seined from the listening waves."
2/1

Silvergill Adept
Until only very recently, Silvergill was thought by most players to be the best card in our deck. But with many effects being introduced into Modern that punish creatures with 1 toughness, most players consider Silvergill a bit too risky.

Umara Wizard
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Whenever you cast an instant, sorcery, or Wizard spell, Umara Wizard gains flying until end of turn.
"You see a waterfall. I see a way up."
—Ko Dari, expedition wizard
Land
Add
4/3

Umara Wizard
Umara Wizard is one of the signature cards of "Flickerfolk," a creative approach to Merfolk. In combination with Ghostly Flicker, cards like Umara Wizard and Glasspool Mimic can be played as lands, then flipped face up for huge value.

Ghostly Flicker
Instant
Exile two target artifacts, creatures, and/or lands you control, then return those cards to the battlefield under your control.
Sometimes it's useful to take a break from existence.

Ghostly Flicker
One of the signature cards of "Flickerfolk," a creative approach to Merfolk. Ghostly Flicker targets cards like Umara Wizard and Glasspool Mimic after they have been played as lands, flipping them face up for huge value.

Thassa, God of the Sea
Legendary Enchantment Creature — God
Indestructible
As long as your devotion to blue is less than five, Thassa isn't a creature. (Each in the mana costs of permanents you control counts toward your devotion to blue.)
At the beginning of your upkeep, scry 1.
: Target creature you control can't be blocked this turn.
5/5

Thassa, God of the Sea
The original Merfolk god before Svyelun, Thassa sadly suffers from not being an actual Merfolk. Though a great card in grindy matchups, Thassa has simply been outclassed by Svyelun.

Merfolk Assassin
If Merfolk ever gets *too* popular in the metagame, Merfolk Assassin will take them down a notch!

Vendilion Clique
Legendary Creature — Faerie Wizard
Flash
Flying
When Vendilion Clique enters the battlefield, look at target player's hand. You may choose a nonland card from it. If you do, that player reveals the chosen card, puts it on the bottom of their library, then draws a card.
3/1

Vendilion Clique
Clique is a proactive way of attacking combo decks. Typically cast during the opponent's draw step, we look to take away a vital piece. Clique has become significantly worse in Modern with the presence of Orcish Bowmasters.

Tidebinder Mage
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
When Tidebinder Mage enters the battlefield, tap target red or green creature an opponent controls. That creature doesn't untap during its controller's untap step for as long as you control Tidebinder Mage.
2/2

Tidebinder Mage
As with virtually all Merfolk creatures, this card appears weak at first glance. After all, it dies to removal, right? But Tidebinder opens up paths to attack, and draws removal away from other significant Merfolk. Excellent in the right matchups.

Archmage's Charm
Instant
Choose one —
• Counter target spell.
• Target player draws two cards.
• Gain control of target nonland permanent with mana value 1 or less.
Illus. Alayna Danner

Archmage's Charm
A wildly versatile spell with a wildly prohibitive casting cost. For a time, some players cut Mutavaults and Caverns to run this card, and did well! However, the consensus today is that those lands are simply too important to cut for one card.

Remand
Instant
Counter target spell. If that spell is countered this way, put it into its owner's hand instead of into that player's graveyard.
Draw a card.
For the Azorius, the law can be a physical shield against chaos and anarchy.

Remand
An old favorite that still has some tricks up its sleeve, Remand is solid against the popular Cascade decks; putting Living End or Crashing Footfalls back in the opponent's hand is basically the same as hard-countering it.

Nix
Instant
Counter target spell if no mana was spent to cast it.
"There is no shortcut to work done true and well. The Creators learned this to their sorrow, the first time they made the world."
—Githri the Prisoner

Nix
Nix is an interesting possibility if you expect to see many free spells in your metagame. Countering an Evoked Grief or Cascade spell for one mana is great value, maybe enough to simply win a game. But Nix's narrowness makes it a hard sell.

Aether Gust
Instant
Choose target spell or permanent that's red or green. Its owner puts it on the top or bottom of their library.
The chill wind extinguishes flame, and frosts the leaf on the branch.

Aether Gust
Aether Gust has generally been pushed out of the format by Subtlety. It's still a solid option, however, if your meta is extremely heavy in red and/or green; being able to deal with things on the stack *or* battlefield is rare versatility!

Repeal
Instant
Return target nonland permanent with mana value X to its owner's hand.
Draw a card.
"Your deed cannot be undone. You, however, can be."
—Agosto, Azorius imperator
Illus. Dan Scott

Repeal
The text "draw a card" is always strong in Magic. Repeal is a flexible bounce spell that replaces itself, making it a very enticing option. Though fantastic in token metas, it gets clunky if we have to pay a lot of mana.

Vapor Snag
Instant
Return target creature to its owner's hand. Its controller loses 1 life.
"This creature is inadequate. Send it to the splicers for innovation."
—Malcator, Executor of Synthesis

Vapor Snag
This was a very popular choice in Modern Merfolk for years. However, with the advent of Harbinger and Trickster, the need for main deck bounce spells was greatly reduced. Today, Vapor Snag is basically outclassed by Fading Hope.

Step Through
Sorcery
Return two target creatures to their owners' hands.
Wizardcycling (, Discard this card: Search your library for a Wizard card, reveal it, put it into your hand, then shuffle.)
Doors open both ways.
Illus. Randy Gallegos

Step Through
A very interesting card that lets us tutor up any of our Wizards (Tide Shaper, Hexcatcher, Trickster, Harbinger, Tidebinder) for two mana. In a pinch, it also allows us to pay five mana to bounce two creatures.

Hibernation
Instant
Return all green permanents to their owners' hands.
On its way to the cave, the armadillo brushed by a sapling. It awoke to find a full-grown tree blocking its path.
Illus. Scott Kirschner

Hibernation
A card from a simpler time, when big green creature decks existed in Modern. Hibernation can be decent in a metagame full of Elves players, but, even then, Elves can often rebuild in a single turn with Heritage Druid.

Dress Down
Enchantment
Flash
When Dress Down enters the battlefield, draw a card.
Creatures lose all abilities.
At the beginning of the end step, sacrifice Dress Down.

Dress Down
All of the creatures that Merfolk Trickster wrecks (Territorial Kavu, Construct tokens, Tarmogoyf, etc) get hit by Dress Down, all at once. It also stops ETBs from happening, but turns our lords off, as well. A tricky card worth close consideration.

Leyline of the Void
Enchantment
If Leyline of the Void is in your opening hand, you may begin the game with it on the battlefield.
If a card would be put into an opponent's graveyard from anywhere, exile it instead.
Where treachery and oblivion converge.

Leyline of the Void
If graveyard strategies become dominant in the metagame, this is an extreme option that can help us compete. However, it is terrible to draw, and should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

Threads of Disloyalty
Enchantment — Aura
Enchant creature with mana value 2 or less
You control enchanted creature.
"Over time, Konda grew ever more suspicious, fearing even his most loyal allies were being manipulated by unseen hands."
—The History of Kamigawa

Threads of Disloyalty
There are a number of options for stealing opponents' creatures, but they are all slightly overcosted, including Threads of Disloyalty. Still, these effects are worth having on one's radar.

Surgical Extraction
Instant
Choose target card in a graveyard other than a basic land card. Search its owner's graveyard, hand, and library for any number of cards with the same name as that card and exile them. Then that player shuffles.

Surgical Extraction
If we counter a big combo spell, Surgical Extraction can pick all the remaining copies out of the opponent's graveyard, hand, and library. As it requires the spell to already be in the graveyard, this is generally not a card we look to play.

RETIRED CARDS

Below are cards that experienced some amount of success in the past, but are no longer competitive choices today. Given the evolution of the Modern format, it is unlikely (but not impossible!) that these cards will ever find their way back into Modern Merfolk.

Master of Waves
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Protection from red
Elemental creatures you control get +1/+1.
When Master of Waves enters the battlefield, create a number of 1/0 blue Elemental creature tokens equal to your devotion to blue. (Each in the mana costs of permanents you control counts toward your devotion to blue.)
2/1

Master of Waves
Master of Waves used to be a proud part of the core. However, removal spells have gotten so diverse and powerful that Master's protection from red is not sufficient for us to risk getting blown out after spending 4 mana.

Benthic Biomancer
Creature — Merfolk Wizard Mutant
: Adapt 1. (If this creature has no +1/+1 counters on it, put a +1/+1 counter on it.)
Whenever one or more +1/+1 counters are put on Benthic Biomancer, draw a card, then discard a card.
"I am my life's work."
1/1

Benthic Biomancer
Affectionately known as "Ben," this card performs best in slow, grindy matchups. The "Adapt" ability can be activated at instant speed, which synergizes with our other instant speed effects. Sadly, Ben's 1 toughness renders him generally unplayable.

Sygg, River Cutthroat
Legendary Creature — Merfolk Rogue
At the beginning of each end step, if an opponent lost 3 or more life this turn, you may draw a card. (Damage causes loss of life.)
"It's not a matter of deserving. It's a matter of strength. The power to hold versus the power to take."
1/3

Sygg, River Cutthroat
Sygg is a very interesting card, as it lines up exceptionally well against Ragavan, one of the scourges of the format. However, in most other situations the 1/3 body and conditional card draw can seem lackluster.

Cursecatcher
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Sacrifice Cursecatcher: Counter target instant or sorcery spell unless its controller pays .
"Of all the things that can be stolen, opportunity is the most valuable."
1/1

Cursecatcher
Though included for years as a playset in Modern Merfolk, Cursecatcher has been rendered obsolete by several factors:
(a) Hexcatcher makes *all* our Merfolk into Cursecatchers;
(b) 1 toughness is poor; and
(c) combo is not prevalent.

Coralhelm Commander
This relatively old card saw a great deal of play in early Modern decks. These days, paying a lot of mana to upgrade Coralhelm Commander is viewed as too risky given the density of removal spells in Modern.

Cosi's Trickster
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Whenever an opponent shuffles their library, you may put a +1/+1 counter on Cosi's Trickster.
She watches the chaos created by the Roil, seeking strength in the patterns of anarchy.
1/1

Cosi's Trickster
This card has never been good, but people have won with them in the past. It is a vanilla 1/1 Merfolk that can grow (or not) depending on how the opponent plays. We simply have far better choices for 1mv creatures now.

Kopala, Warden of Waves
Legendary Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Spells your opponents cast that target a Merfolk you control cost 2 more to cast.
Abilities your opponents activate that target a Merfolk you control cost 2 more to activate.
"I know these waters better than you know yourselves."
2/2

Kopala, Warden of Waves
Kopala will always be the "worse Kira," sadly; its protection ability is simply far less impactful. And with Svyelun now providing main deck protection, Kopala seems further than ever from seeing competitive play.

Venser, Shaper Savant
Legendary Creature — Human Wizard
Flash
When Venser, Shaper Savant enters the battlefield, return target spell or permanent to its owner's hand.
His marvels of artifice pale in comparison to the developing machinery of his mind.
2/2

Venser, Shaper Savant
Venser was once playable in Merfolk, but the casting cost just seems astronomical today. Flash is excellent, and the ability is fantastic (capable even of bouncing uncounterable spells, like Supreme Verdict), but this card simply can't keep up now.

Fish Facts

In 2016, at Grand Prix Las Vegas (a huge tournament with over 2,200 players), Merfolk pilot **Simon Slutsky** went the entire first day without dropping a single match (9-0)! He lost just one round on day two (5-1) for a combined record of 14-1, finishing the Swiss portion of the tournament in first place! Simon entered the Top 8 as top seed.

After defeating Melira Combo and Jund in the quarter-finals and semi-finals, Simon had to face 13-year-old Ethan Brown in the finals… playing Merfolk's nemesis, Affinity! Fortunately, there is a video (**link**) of this epic match, and Simon wrote a truly marvelous tournament report (**link**). Fish aficionados must check out both the video and the report! (*Don't read ahead if you want to avoid spoilers!*)

Simon mulliganed to six in game one, keeping one land and no Aether Vial on the play. He missed his second land drop and was promptly overrun. The commentators were already set to crown Ethan the youngest GP winner in history, but Simon wasn't quite done yet.

The next games were two of the least likely victories ever seen in high-level Magic. Simon clawed his way back to win game two after a Whipflare and Galvanic Blast roasted his first three creatures (prompting the commentators to say "Ethan's gonna win the tournament!"). In game three, Simon's turn one Aether Vial was Spell Pierced (see above), a crushing play. However, on the back of Hurkyl's Recall and Merrow Reejerey, Simon managed to find *exactly* lethal damage the turn before Ethan would have easily won!

CHAPTER 4: *General Strategy*

USING TEMPO TO OUR ADVANTAGE

As mentioned previously, **Modern Merfolk is a tempo deck**. In the game of Magic, this means we want to establish some number of early attackers while simultaneously disrupting the opponent's game plan. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to win games relatively quickly. With spells that can disrupt creature strategies (Merfolk Trickster, Harbinger of the Tides, Subtlety, Dismember), spell-based strategies (Vodalian Hexcatcher, Subtlety, Force of Negation), and land-based strategies (Tide Shaper, Spreading Seas), Merfolk has the tools to execute our tempo plan in virtually any matchup (note: Tishana's Tidebinder can help against all of these)!.

In general, we want to disrupt the opponent with our creatures in the earliest part of the game, as this allows us to begin attacking as quickly as possible. While deploying these creatures, we can make excellent use of well-costed spells such as Dismember (for one mana) and Force of Negation (zero mana) to help gain control of the game. Aether Vial is a tremendous asset alongside all of this, allowing us to play an extra creature every turn cycle at instant speed, increasing our attacking power and our ability to interact with the opponent.

In the example above, Merfolk is on the draw, and the UR opponent has played a Ledger Shredder. On our second turn, we have many options, but not all options are equal! Let's examine the possibilities:

1. Playing an Islandwalk lord would almost certainly result in the opponent simply removing it on their next turn, and likely casting a second spell to get value from their Ledger Shredder conniving and attacking.

2. Casting Silvergill seems like a solid enough option as we need to draw more lands, but that still leaves us tapped out while the opponent merrily continues with their plan (as in option #1).

3. Passing the turn and holding up Hexcatcher is an interesting possibility. However, the opponent will likely have three mana available on their next turn - enough to pay the tax if we sacrifice Hexcatcher. And if we cast Hexcatcher and choose to not sacrifice it, the opponent can once again remove it and cast a second spell for Ledger Shredder value, as in the first two examples.

4. Passing the turn and casting Merfolk Trickster during the opponent's upkeep is the superior option in this situation. If it resolves, the Ledger Shredder will be unable to attack, and the opponent will be unable to gain any value from it on their turn. At the same time, we are developing our board. With two Tricksters in hand, we will likely want to repeat this play the following turn, as well, as it achieves exactly what we want in the early part of the game. (If the opponent uses removal on any of the Merfolk Tricksters, this means they will have one less removal spell to use on our lords once we begin casting them.)

WINNING WITH ISLANDWALK

One of the challenging aspects of playing Modern Merfolk well is accurately perceiving the correct moment to pivot from a focus on interacting to a focus on attacking. When we decide it's time to attack, our two Islandwalk lords (Lord of Atlantis and Master of the Pearl Trident) let us really step on the gas pedal! With some number of non-lord creatures established on the board and the opponent's life total reduced, deploying a lord or two can instantly balloon our attacking power, provide Islandwalk, and often win a game on the spot. This is particularly true if the opponent has tapped out or is otherwise unable to interact with us. The flip side of this, however, is that we need to be very careful with our attacking decisions if the opponent has mana up; losing a lord in combat can lead to terrible blowouts, shifting winning positions to losses in an instant.

The screenshot above is a continuation from the game shown previously. The opponent played a fourth land, then cast their third Ledger Shredder and a Lightning Bolt targeting our Master of the Pearl Trident. Svyelun's ability is forcing the opponent to pay ward 1 for the Lightning Bolt to resolve, which will tap them out. In this spot, we let the opponent pay for ward, and allow all the Ledger Shredder triggers resolve. Then, the best option is to

flash in Vodalian Hexcatcher. With Hexcatcher on board, we can sacrifice Merfolk Trickster to counter the Bolt, which would effectively win the game, as the opponent couldn't attack for lethal in the air, and the Master of the Pearl Trident would be a 3/3, able to eat Ragavan if it attacks (preventing them from getting a Treasure token and any further counterplay). **The opponent would know they have lost even if they leave back blockers, because of the power of Islandwalk.**

MAKING MULLIGAN DECISIONS

As with any deck in any format, smart mulligan decisions are essential for success. Let's get started with some basics. In choosing your opening hand, remember this above all:

RULE #1: DO NOT RUSH!

The entire game will be shaped by the opening hand you choose to keep, so it is critical to make sure the hand is workable before coming to a decision. A few questions to ask yourself while thinking:

- **Does this hand have a plan?** (If not, or if the plan is very weak, mulligan!)
- **Does this hand have the tools to win?** (If not, consider mulliganing!)
- **Will this hand rely heavily on drawing specific cards?** (If yes, consider mulliganing!)

Remember, if you're **on the draw**, you get to see an extra card. This fact makes it easier to keep some borderline hands. When you're on the draw, you also have the benefit of knowing whether your opponent is taking a mulligan before making your own decision. If you're **on the play**, you'd better have a solid plan from turn one with the cards you choose to keep.

With these general considerations outlined, let's address some concepts specific to opening hands in Merfolk:

- **Aether Vial is by far our best turn one play!** We have a greater chance of winning any given game when we open with Vial. For this reason, we typically keep borderline hands if they have Vial. An opener with two Vials is a bit awkward, but not terrible as long as we don't have too many lands.
- **Mutavaults** have fantastic synergy in the deck, particularly with Hexcatcher, Svyelun, and Deeproot Pilgrimage. However, their grey mana can make casting spells awkward. If an opening hand has Mutavault, make sure you have an idea of how it will be used in the game.
- Though many who lack a deep understanding of Modern Merfolk think the **Islandwalk lords** are our best and most important cards, they are actually not very useful in the early part of the game, and are easily removed before we get any value out of them. We want to have interactive tools in our opening hand. For this reason, a hand with only lands and Islandwalk lords will often be a mulligan.

With these concepts in mind, let's explore fifteen sample hands! Think carefully about each hand and take notes on whether you would keep or mulligan, and why. Consider four scenarios for each hand: (1) Opening 7 on the play; (2) Opening 7 on the draw; (3) Mulligan to 6 on the play; (4) Mulligan to 6 on the draw. There will be an answer key afterwards with solutions and explanations.

HAND #1

Island
Island
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1
Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, t...
3/2
Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, t...
3/2
Svyelun of Sea and...
Legendary Creature - Merfo...
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card....
3/4
Svyelun of Sea and...
Legendary Creature - Merfo...
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card....
3/4

HAND #2

Island
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Rishadan Dockhand
Creature - Merfolk
Islandwalk
, : Tap target land.
1/2
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1
Lord of Atlantis
Creature - Merfolk
Other Merfolk get +1/+1 and have islandwalk.
2/2

HAND #3

Island
Island
Otawara, Soaring City
Legendary Land
0 legendary creatures controlled by m_joe.
: Add .
Channel — 3, Discard Otawara, Soaring City: Return target artifact, creature, enc...
Cavern of Souls
Land
As Cavern of Souls enters the battlefield, choose a creature type.
: Add .
: Add one mana of any color. Spend this mana onl...
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Master of the Pearl Trident
Creature - Merfolk
Other Merfolk creatures you control get +1/+1 and have islandwalk.
2/2

HAND #4

Island
Island
Otawara, Soaring City
Legendary Land
0 legendary creatures controlled by m_joe.
: Add .
Channel — 3, Discard Otawara, Soaring City: Return target artifact, creature, enc...
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Dismember
Instant
Target creature gets -5/-5 until end of turn.
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1

HAND #5

Island
Island
Cavern of Souls
Land
As Cavern of Souls enters the battlefield, choose a creature type.
: Add .
: Add one mana of any color. Spend this mana onl...
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Rishadan Dockhand
Creature - Merfolk
Islandwalk
, : Tap target land.
1/2
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1

HAND #6

Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Rishadan Dockhand
Creature - Merfolk
Islandwalk
, : Tap target land.
1/2
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1
Lord of Atlantis
Creature - Merfolk
Other Merfolk get +1/+1 and have islandwalk.
2/2
Svyelun of Sea and...
Legendary Creature - Merfo...
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card....
3/4

HAND #7

Rishadan Dockhand
Creature - Merfolk
Islandwalk
, : Tap target land.
1/2
Tide Shaper
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Kicker
When Tide Shaper enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, target land becomes an Island for as long as Tide Shaper...
1/1
Dismember
Instant
Target creature gets -5/-5 until end of turn.
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1
Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, t...
3/2
Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, t...
3/2

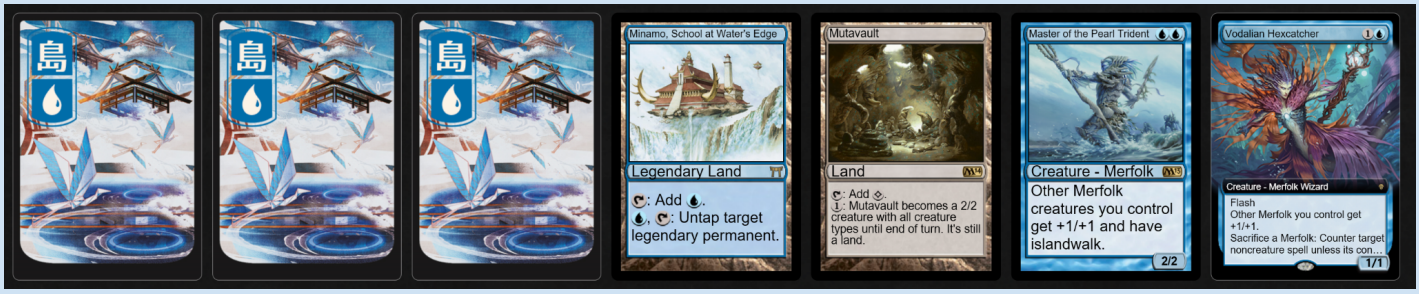
HAND #8

Cavern of Souls
Land
As Cavern of Souls enters the battlefield, choose a creature type.
: Add .
: Add one mana of any color. Spend this mana onl...
Minamo, School at Water's Edge
Legendary Land
: Add .
, : Untap target legendary permanent.
Otawara, Soaring City
Legendary Land
0 legendary creatures controlled by m_joe.
: Add .
Channel — 3, Discard Otawara, Soaring City: Return target artifact, creature, enc...
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Deeproot Pilgrimage
Enchantment
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
Merfolk Trickster
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Merfolk Trickster enters the battlefield, tap target creature an opponent controls. It loses all abilities until end...
2/2

HAND #9

Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Tide Shaper
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Kicker
When Tide Shaper enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, target land becomes an Island for as long as Tide Shaper...
1/1
Deeproot Pilgrimage
Enchantment
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
Deeproot Pilgrimage
Enchantment
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
Svyelun of Sea and...
Legendary Creature - Merfo...
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card....
3/4

HAND #10


Minamo, School at Water's Edge
Legendary Land
: Add .
, : Untap target legendary permanent.
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Master of the Pearl Trident
Creature - Merfolk
Other Merfolk creatures you control get +1/+1 and have islandwalk.
2/2
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1

HAND #11

Cavern of Souls
Land
As Cavern of Souls enters the battlefield, choose a creature type.
: Add .
: Add one mana of any color. Spend this mana onl...
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1
Master of the Pearl Trident
Creature - Merfolk
Other Merfolk creatures you control get +1/+1 and have islandwalk.
2/2
Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, t...
3/2

HAND #12

Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Merfolk Trickster
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Merfolk Trickster enters the battlefield, tap target creature an opponent controls. It loses all abilities until end...
2/2
Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its con...
1/1
Lord of Atlantis
Creature - Merfolk
Other Merfolk get +1/+1 and have islandwalk.
2/2

HAND #13

Otawara, Soaring City
Legendary Land
0 legendary creatures controlled by m_joe.
: Add .
Channel — , Discard Otawara, Soaring City: Return target artifact, creature, enc...
Cavern of Souls
Land
As Cavern of Souls enters the battlefield, choose a creature type.
: Add .
: Add one mana of any color. Spend this mana onl...
Tide Shaper
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Kicker
When Tide Shaper enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, target land becomes an Island for as long as Tide Shaper...
1/1
Deeproot Pilgrimage
Enchantment
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
Lord of Atlantis
Creature - Merfolk
Other Merfolk get +1/+1 and have islandwalk.
2/2

HAND #14

Dismember
Instant
Target creature gets -5/-5 until end of turn.
Deeproot Pilgrimage
Enchantment
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, t...
3/2

HAND #15

Minamo, School at Water's Edge
Legendary Land
: Add , .
, : Untap target legendary permanent.
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Aether Vial
Artifact
At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a charge counter on Aether Vial.
: You may put a creature card with mana value equal...
Tide Shaper
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Kicker
When Tide Shaper enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, target land becomes an Island for as long as Tide Shaper...
1/1
Svyelun of Sea and...
Legendary Creature - Merfo...
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card....
3/4
Svyelun of Sea and...
Legendary Creature - Merfo...
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card....
3/4

MULLIGAN SOLUTIONS

The goal of this exercise is to get you thinking deeply about why we might keep or mulligan any given hand. These solutions are provided by a Modern Merfolk pilot with a decade of experience with the deck, so you can trust that the decisions are deeply informed.

HAND #1
Opening 7 on the play: Mulligan
Opening 7 on the draw: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the play: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the draw: Mulligan

Far too slow. A mulligan in all four scenarios. It lacks Aether Vial or a 1mv spell, and has far too many 3mv spells.

HAND #2
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

This hand is an easy keep in all four scenarios. Double-Vial hands can be very strong. This one has nice lands, and interactive creatures with lord effects. As a keep on 6 we would bottom the second Aether Vial.

HAND #3
Opening 7 on the play: Mulligan
Opening 7 on the draw: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the play: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the draw: Mulligan

While this hand also has two Vials, it lacks any kind of action. Easy mulligan in all four scenarios.

HAND #4
Opening 7 on the play: Mulligan
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

While Aether Vial is great, this hand is land-heavy and lacks any significant action; as an opening 7 on the play we could easily find ourselves with nothing to do after the second turn! But as a 7 on the draw we would at least see an extra card, and this would become keepable. As a keep on 6 we would bottom an Island.

HAND #5
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

Very similar to the previous hand with one key difference: it has a 1mv creature. This makes Vial and Hexcatcher both better. This hand demonstrates an important idea: *If a borderline opening 7 would be a keep as a mulligan to 6, we should often keep that 7.* As a mulligan to 6 we would bottom an Island.

HAND #6
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

This is the best opening hand shown so far. A snap keep in all four scenarios.

HAND #7
Opening 7 on the play: Mulligan
Opening 7 on the draw: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the play: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

There are few set-in-stone rules regarding mulligans with Merfolk, but this hand demonstrates one of them: NEVER keep a one-land non-Vial opening 7 in the blind. We can simply do better. However, as a mull to 6 on the draw, we can consider keeping this hand; it can play Magic if it hits a second land, and we'll draw two cards before we need to make our second land drop. As a keep on 6 we would bottom the second Tidebinder.

HAND #8
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

Cavern of Souls
Minamo, School at Water's Edge
Otawara, Soaring City
Mutavault
Deeproot Pilgrimage
Merfolk Trickster
Land
Legendary Land
Enchantment
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Tap: Add one mana of any color. Spend this mana only...
Tap: Untap target legendary permanent.
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.

This looks like a mess but is actually quite solid. Mutavault is strong with Pilgrimage, and 2 Mutavaults are better. The downside of this hand is that it is rather slow - but it is a keep in 3 out of our 4 scenarios as it is a solid hand against any midrange or control matchup. We only mull this as an opening 7 on the draw, as it gets a bit too slow and we can likely improve if we go to 6. As a keep on 6, we would bottom Otawara.

HAND #9
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

Mutavault
Tide Shaper
Deeproot Pilgrimage
Svyelun of Sea and...
Land
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Enchantment
Kicker
When Tide Shaper enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, target land becomes an Island for as long as Tide Shaper...
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card...

An easy keep in all four scenarios. With Pilgrimage in hand, we want to run out Tide Shaper on turn 1 with hopes of attacking and making a token with Pilgrimage on turn 2. Svyelun and Mutavault both have excellent synergy with Pilgrimage, making this hand quite attractive.

HAND #10
Opening 7 on the play: Mulligan
Opening 7 on the draw: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

Earlier, I mentioned the idea: *If a borderline opening 7 would be a keep as a mulligan to 6, we should often keep that 7.* This is an example of a hand that doesn't follow that guideline; the hand is good enough as a keep on 6 (we wouldn't want to go to 5), bottoming an Island, but it is slow and land-heavy. As an opening 7 we should mull.

HAND #11
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

This hand is a keep in the same three scenarios as hand #8, for the same reasons (it's a slow opening 7 on the draw, but solid enough as a mull to 6, bottoming an Island). But this *could* be a justifiable keep as 7 on the draw, following the guideline: *If a borderline opening 7 would be a keep as a mulligan to 6, we should often keep that 7.*

HAND #12
Opening 7 on the play: Mulligan
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

This is the only 1-land + Vial opener in this quiz, and it's a doozy. The reason I've chosen to mull at 7 on the play is the hand *needs* a second land on the *very first draw* to not fall badly behind; if you whiff, you won't have a creature on board until turn 3! The hand is far less risky on the draw, as you get *twice* the odds to hit that second land on time. As a keep on 6, we would bottom the third Hexcatcher.

HAND #13
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

If a borderline opening 7 would be a keep as a mulligan to 6, we should often keep that 7. This hand is basically a mulligan to 6 with a bonus Otawara. As an actual keep on 6, we would bottom the second Otawara.

HAND #14
Opening 7 on the play: Mulligan
Opening 7 on the draw: Mulligan
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

Yet another hand that violates the guideline mentioned above. As a mulligan to 6, we have three spells and three lands (including a decent curve), and should keep and bottom an Island. However, as an opening 7, we're looking for more; this hand lacks not just Vial, but also doesn't have a single 1mv or 2mv creature.

HAND #15
Opening 7 on the play: Keep
Opening 7 on the draw: Keep
Mull to 6 on the play: Keep
Mull to 6 on the draw: Keep

This is a perfectly acceptable (if slightly awkward) hand. The awkwardness is somewhat offset by the presence of Minamo and Mutavault, both of which combine nicely with Svyelun.

TYPICAL GAME SEQUENCING

Though every individual game we play is unique, there are some very typical, broad play patterns that our deck follows. Here is a general outline of what to expect in any given game (after we settle on an opening hand):

Early Game: It's typically best to begin by playing a blue source rather than Mutavault on turn one. Starting the game with two blue sources lets us cast any of our 2-drops on turn two, and sets us up well to begin casting two spells on turn three or four, and beyond (two or more Mutavaults can make this difficult). Note, however, that you may want to play Mutavaults earlier in order to begin making tokens with Deeproot Pilgrimage. Looking beyond considerations of land sequencing: play Aether Vial as early as possible if you have it, and interact in relevant ways with the opponent during the early turns of the game.

Mid Game: Try to get Svyelun on the board as soon as possible and protect her (protecting her sometimes means delaying playing her by a turn - circumstances can vary from matchup to matchup). Choose lines that let you wait as long as possible before committing resources to the board in order to respond more accurately to the opponent's plays. This frequently includes things like keeping a lord in hand during our attack, even though we could use Aether Vial to put it into play right away for more damage. This kind of line can happen for many reasons: maybe waiting with Vial means being able to use Trickster on the opponent's turn, or to vial in a surprise Hexcatcher to counter an important spell the opponent felt safe casting, or just to flash any lord in on the opponent's turn. Many times, Vialing in a lord during combat won't even change the number of attacks it will take to win (referred to as our "clock"), and doing so is an especially poor way to play. ***Remember, Merfolk is not just an aggro deck! Play intelligently!***

Late Game: Look for ways to make your opponent tap out when you see a line for a lethal attack. Save Islandwalk lords for a moment when they will do the most damage and/or be the safest. Maintain the ability to interact as long as possible, but don't be afraid to go for the win with your shields down if it's your only viable option.

CHAPTER 5: *Aether Vial Strategy*

THE ROLE OF AETHER VIAL

To be clear: **Aether Vial is the most powerful spell in Modern Merfolk.** It's the card that makes our dinky tribal deck competitive. It all but invalidates opponents' counterspells, and allows us to play more often at instant speed. While it is possible for us to win games without Vial, we are far more likely to win when we do have it.

When played on turn one, **Aether Vial creates a "parallel curve;"** on turn two, we can cast a 2-drop and put a 1-drop into play with Aether Vial. This continues on turn three with casting a 3-drop/vialing in a 2-drop, and on turn 4 with casting a 4-drop/vialing a 3-drop.

The measurement of the efficiency with which one uses mana is, in effect, a measurement of how one uses time, or "tempo," in a given game. Each turn presents a player with a certain amount of mana they can use. If they don't use all that mana, they are wasting resources (mana and time). **Aether Vial is a massively powerful tempo resource** for creature decks.

The "parallel curve" phenomenon is illustrated in the graphic below (adapted from **Merfolk Joe's Guide to Modern Merfolk**). By turn four, an Aether Vial deck can deploy a full **50% more** mana's worth of creatures!

Aether Vial provides the deck with a vast **flexibility** in how it is able to respond to the opponent's decisions. This is because Vial can be activated at instant speed (any time we have priority, on our turn or the opponent's). Fundamentally, this allows us to play around all sorcery-speed effects such as Grist and Supreme Verdict. But, more importantly, it enables us to keep information hidden until the very last moment, letting our opponent walk into any number of traps we might be setting.

Speaking of traps: the game state below is a great example of how Aether Vial lets us compete even if we fall behind on lands. Merfolk won this game, not just through the Ugin, but also through the Ulamog the opponent fetched off of Sanctum (a top-decked Subtlety was a huge help!).

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Using Aether Vial optimally in every situation takes great skill, and **the difficulty lies in timing**. Is it more important to put an extra lord down immediately for a fast clock, or to wait and leave Vial up to interact with the opponent on their turn? Should we use Vial to put Hexcatcher into play to counter that spell, or put Trickster into play to tap down that creature? And when should we do these things? During our turn? During the opponent's upkeep? At the start of their combat phase? In response to a spell being cast?

The answers to all these questions are not cut-and-dry. **Knowing when and how to use Aether Vial takes not just knowledge of our own deck, but a deep understanding of every other deck in the format.**

For one example, if we know a particular deck plays Veil of Summer in their sideboard, we may want to use Vial to put Trickster into play to tap down a potential attacker during the opponent's **upkeep** step, before they have a chance to draw a Veil that could prevent the Trickster's ability from resolving.

For another example, if we know a particular deck plays an **instant-speed combo** (Violent Outburst in Living End or Rhinos, for example), we would do well to use Vial to put Hexcatcher onto the board when the opponent is tapped out (or, at least, when they don't have enough mana to cast their combo spell). In this way, we can ensure we get the Hexcatcher onto the board before they can cast their important spell. If, instead, we activate Aether Vial while they have sufficient mana up, they can respond to our activation by casting their spell, and resolve it before Hexcatcher ever enters the battlefield.

However, the flip side of this last example is if we know a particular deck plays a **sorcery-speed combo** (Indomitable Creativity, for example), it is going to be better to hold back the Vial activation to try to bait their important spell. In response, we can put Hexcatcher into play with Vial and counter the spell.

With all of this finicky instant-speed activation stuff, it can be easy to fall into the habit of always waiting until the opponent's turn to use Aether Vial. We often want to activate Vial **on our main phase** is to put Svyelun immediately into play, to protect our other creatures with ward as soon as possible.

Remember, keeping information hidden for as long as possible is typically very beneficial, and Aether Vial helps us achieve this. But there are times when waiting too long is poor, and occasionally even fatal. With patience and observation, you will come to time your Aether Vial activations like a pro.

TO TICK UP, OR NOT TO TICK UP

In the past, we generally wanted to keep exactly two charge counters on Aether Vial, since we have so many 2-drops in the deck and want Vial to have the best chance of being relevant. However, with the relatively recent additions of Svyelun and Tishana's Tidebinder to the deck, we now have a significant number of 3-drops, as well. As such, **we need to think very carefully about whether to keep Vial on 2 or 3** at any given point in a game - what top-decks would be most impactful? Would it be better to be able to Vial in a Tidebinder, or a lord? These decisions can make or break a game.

It is correct to tick Aether Vial up to 3 or even 4 if the last creature in your hand is 3mv or 4mv, in order to maximize Vial's efficient use in the game. This can be an especially great choice if you can end the game quickly.

In the screenshot below, after vialing in the lord on our opponent's end step, the plan for turn four is to tick Vial up to three and play a fourth land, which will allow us to cast the first Subtlety. Then, on turn five, Vial will reach four counters, allowing us to put *two* Subtleties into play in one turn, which should easily win the game.

TIPS AND TRICKS

In addition to the advice to simply pay close attention during your matches in order to improve with Aether Vial, here are a few handy tips and tricks:

- If you have a 2-drop and a 4-drop in hand, you can **activate Vial on your own upkeep**, with Aether Vial's trigger on the stack. After putting your 2-drop into play, you can resolve Vial's trigger and choose to add a third counter. Then, on your very next turn, you can add the fourth counter and put the 4-drop into play.
- If you have no creatures in hand but an Aether Vial on board, it can be productive to **activate it as a bluff**, just to see how the opponent responds. If they hesitate, it can indicate that they might have some effect in hand. Conversely, a quick dismissal of your activation might mean they have no interaction.
- **If you have two Vials** (say, on two and three) and your only card in hand is a 2-drop, activate the Vial on three first. If the opponent responds by casting a spell like Kolaghan's Command or Vendilion Clique (either of which would cause you to lose your creature), you can respond to their spell by activating the Vial on two to put your 2-drop into play. Tricky!
- In most cases, if you don't have an Aether Vial in your opening hand but draw one for your second turn, it will still be correct to **play the Vial on turn two**, even though it doesn't make fully efficient use of your mana on that turn. This is because Aether Vial will eventually make up this tempo discrepancy and, hopefully, even pull you ahead.

CHAPTER 6: *Islandwalk Lord Strategy*

THE ROLE OF ISLANDWALK LORDS

Master of the Pearl Trident
Creature — Merfolk
Other Merfolk creatures you control get +1/+1 and have islandwalk. (They can't be blocked as long as defending player controls an Island.)
"Let the land dwellers know the coast is no longer the border between our realms. A new age of empire has begun."
Illus. Ryan Pancoast
2/2
Lord of Atlantis
Creature — Merfolk
Other Merfolk get +1/+1 and have islandwalk. (They can't be blocked as long as defending player controls an Island.)
2/2

Lord of Atlantis and Master of the Pearl Trident, our two Islandwalk lords, are central, defining cards in Modern Merfolk. However, there is confusion among players unfamiliar with the deck as to the actual role of these cards. Because they have long been the face of the deck, and their effect gives our creatures +1/+1, the general misconception is that Merfolk is a go-wide aggro deck, generally similar in strategy to decks ranging from Prowess to 8-Whack to Affinity to Elves. But nothing could be further from the truth! Modern Merfolk is far more interactive than any of those decks, and our approach is more nuanced.

Rather than something Modern Merfolk always expects to establish a critical mass of, Islandwalk lords are often used surgically, with a single copy. After interacting with the opponent for several turns and reducing their life total with non-lord creatures, we can often find a moment where playing one Islandwalk lord will very suddenly swing a game in our favor, if not simply win immediately. The lord makes our creatures bigger, yes, but, more importantly, it makes them **unblockable!**

More than the +1/+1 anthem effect, **Islandwalk** is the most fundamental strategic aspect of these lords. Yes, the fact that they grow our Merfolk is extremely significant, and, sometimes, our big creatures win games without ever actually using Islandwalk. But making our entire team unblockable is such a consistently powerful ability that the deck and its play patterns are built around it.

For many years, **Spreading Seas** was a core part of Modern Merfolk, specifically to aid in achieving access to Islandwalk. As of mid-2021, the deck has switched over to playing **Tide Shaper**, a Merfolk creature that performs the same essential function of providing access to Islandwalk. Typically, when Spreading Seas was in the deck, we would prioritize playing creatures out in the early game, before the enchantment, in order to begin applying pressure as soon as possible. Tide Shaper has been a great addition to the deck because it allows both these goals (pressure and access to Islandwalk) to be accomplished early and efficiently.

WHEN TO PUT ISLANDWALK LORDS INTO PLAY

There will always be opening hands where playing an Islandwalk lord on turn two is the best (or only) option. However, our primary approach is to play interactive Merfolk (Tide Shaper, Vodalian Hexcatcher, Merfolk Trickster, Harbinger of the Tides, Tishana's Tidebinder) on turns two and three. This gets bodies on the battlefield to begin attacking, while also achieving some sort of tempo advantage. Frequently, opponents need to use removal spells on some of these early creatures in order to not take too much damage. As mentioned above, we want to attack for a few turns to pressure the opponent's life total and force them to interact with us as they also try to execute their strategy. Once the opponent has expended resources and is less likely to have more removal spells, we pounce with the Islandwalk lords and try to close out the game.

Apart from this very generalized strategic approach, there are countless specific scenarios where it is beneficial for us to either cast or vial in an Islandwalk lord. See the section below for some helpful tips and tricks.

TIPS AND TRICKS

Rather than try to share every single possible scenario one might encounter, here is a list of helpful advice for playing Islandwalk lords well (note - some of these suggestions apply to Vodalian Hexcatcher, too).

- Respect the blue-intensive casting costs of Lord of Atlantis and Master of the Pearl Trident (and other creatures in the deck). This means making sure to **play enough blue lands** in the early part of the game, and not keeping a hand too heavy with Mutavaults (unless the hand has Aether Vial and/or Deeproot Pilgrimage, in which case keeping may be a possibility).

- Know what kind of **damage-based removal** you might expect to see in any matchup and do your best to use lords to play around it. Against Burn, this means getting our creatures to four toughness if ever possible, in order to make them immune to Searing Blaze and other spells that deal three damage. Decks might play Wrenn and Six, whose one damage can kill our one-toughness creatures, or spells like Fire or Stomp that deal two damage. Lords (and correct sequencing) are relevant in all these scenarios.

- Aether Vial makes lords into **combat tricks.** Buffing our team's stats mid-combat can lead to very favorable outcomes, whether on offense or defense. Just be sure to think through any interaction the opponent might have before committing to combat decisions, particularly any time lords are involved, as outcomes can be swingy when lords are removed without having considered that possibility beforehand.

- A blue opponent may start a game against us by playing non-basic lands to try to keep us off Islandwalk. Keeping Islandwalk lords in hand into the later part of a game may lure such an opponent into a false sense of security, such that they'll finally play an Island, and we can often punish such a misstep swiftly and mercilessly.

CHAPTER 7: *Vodalian Hexcatcher Strategy*

THE ROLE OF HEXCATCHER

There are three things Modern Merfolk is always looking for more of:

1. +1/+1 "lord" effects
2. Flash creatures
3. Interaction stapled onto Merfolk

Vodalian Hexcatcher
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Flash
Other Merfolk you control get +1/+1.
Sacrifice a Merfolk: Counter target noncreature spell unless its controller pays 1.
1/1

Vodalian Hexcatcher, miraculously, provides all three of these things in one package. Modern Merfolk has improved dramatically since the addition of this powerful card!

The heart of Hexcatcher is the flash ability. Being able to cast it at instant speed makes its other two abilities far more impactful.

We have long benefitted from the ability to put Islandwalk lords into play at instant speed with Aether Vial, as a combat trick or to save a creature from damage-based removal. The addition of Hexcatcher increases our ability to **deploy "lord" effects at instant speed**, and to do so even twice (or more!) in one turn.

For years, Modern Merfolk played Cursecatcher, whose ability allowed us to sacrifice it to counter an instant or sorcery unless the opponent paid one mana. It was a small effect for a small card, but it sometimes did work, delaying our opponent from casting an important spell for a turn. And Cursecatcher lacked flash, so, without Aether Vial, we always simply had to cast it on our main phase, making it easy for our opponent to play around.

Today, **Hexcatcher makes *all* our Merfolk into *better* Cursecatchers** (being able to counter *any* non-creature spell, not just instants and sorceries), and **at instant speed!** This improves all our 1-drops significantly, because they can now act as pseudo Force Spikes in combination with Hexcatcher. Beyond that, it improves *all* our Merfolk for the same reason, making cards like Harbinger of the Tides a better choice now than a non-Merfolk like Brazen Borrower.

Hexcatcher's **casting cost** also helps the deck! At 1U rather than UU, we're able to use Mutavault's mana to cast Hexcatcher. Reducing our dependence on blue lands makes many more opening hands keepable, and makes curving out during games far more manageable. Of course, as a 2-drop, Hexcatcher works well with our plan of frequently having Aether Vial on two counters.

One final thing to note about Hexcatcher is that **it is only a 1/1**. This just means we need to be somewhat careful with running it out in certain spots. For example, we would hate to get it killed by Wrenn and Six's second ability. But flash helps it play around many dangerous situations.

Deeproot Pilgrimage has excellent synergy with Hexcatcher, providing lots of Merfolk tokens to sacrifice to its ability.

TIPS AND TRICKS

Vodalian Hexcatcher has greatly improved some of Modern Merfolk's matchups, and has introduced some fun and powerful lines to be aware of during your games.

- Flash Hexcatcher in as a third Merfolk to turn on **Svyelun**'s Indestructible ability.
- **Mutavaults** are often great for sacrificing to Hexcatcher's ability. This is one of several compelling reasons to include a full playset of Mutavaults in the deck.
- Hexcatcher has single-handedly improved our **Living End** matchup, and not merely because of its ability to counter their payoff spell. No, the reason Hexcatcher is so excellent against Living End is rather sneaky: its ability allows us to **sacrifice our entire team of Merfolk**, only to come back after Living End resolves! However, we can only pull this maneuver off when the opponent casts **Violent Outburst** to Cascade, not Shardless Agent; the idea is that we sacrifice our team targeting the Outburst, *not* the Living End (see screenshot below: all the Hexcatcher triggers are targeting Violent Outburst - make sure to hold priority by pressing the Ctrl key while playing on MTGO!).

  In this way, the Living End will resolve, and all our sacrificed Merfolk will return to the battlefield. Another way to play, if we have a creature advantage on board, is to simply sacrifice enough Merfolk to counter the Living End. In this way, we still begin filling up our graveyard with creatures, but continue to maintain our advantage on board. The best line will vary each game, so think carefully!

- Against black decks, play other lords ahead of Hexcatcher when possible to avoid getting blown out by **Orcish Bowmasters.**

- A very tricky and fun line involves casting **Hexcatcher and blocking with Mutavault**, all for only three mana. First, we activate Mutavault and choose to block an attacking creature. After that, we can tap Mutavault for mana, along with a blue source, to cast Hexcatcher! Lines like this are very difficult for an opponent to see, and so are very valuable for us to be aware of. This particular trick is excellent against 2-power creatures such as Ragavan and Goblin Guide, as Mutavault becomes a 3/3 with Hexcatcher on the board, and can eat the attacker! (Note, Mutavault can't make mana if it has summoning sickness!)
- Don't hesitate to use Hexcatcher itself as a counterspell. For example, imagine a scenario where we're on the draw with no creatures on board yet, Hexcatcher in hand, and it's the opponent's third turn. If they cast Teferi, Time Raveler, we are very happy to cast and **sacrifice Hexcatcher to its own ability** to counter the Teferi. Such a play is tempo positive (we spent only two mana versus the opponent's three mana), and card neutral (we each spend a card). Perhaps most importantly, odds are their Teferi was much more important to their plan than Hexcatcher was to ours - an excellent trade for us.

CHAPTER 8: *Merfolk Trickster Strategy*

THE ROLE OF MERFOLK TRICKSTER

Merfolk Trickster
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Merfolk Trickster enters the battlefield, tap target creature an opponent controls. It loses all abilities until end of turn.
Saved from destruction by one planeswalker's sacrifice, the Eliterate colony forswore the taking of life.
2/2

Merfolk Trickster is one of Modern Merfolk's best cards in creature matchups. At the very least, it taps down and removes all ability text from the opponent's most threatening creature for a turn. At its best, Trickster can ambush an attacker and reduce its power and/or toughness, killing it immediately or allowing us to eat it during blocks. In these cases, Trickster is effectively a removal spell on a 2-drop Merfolk with flash.

Trickster is also pretty solid in non-creature matchups, as it has flash and can be held up alongside counterspells. However, it is one of the first cards to board out in these matchups, as its ability is not relevant.

In general, the more instant-speed effects we have, the more flexible we can be.

GENERAL USES FOR TRICKSTER

There are a few typical situations where Merfolk Trickster is very useful:

- The most common use of Trickster is to cast it **during the opponent's beginning of combat step** to tap down their biggest creature, preventing it from attacking (and eliminating it as a blocker on our following attack). For this reason, you should set a stop on MTGO at your opponent's beginning of combat step.
- However, there will be situations where we actually *want* the creature to attack, so we can block it. In these cases, we want to cast Trickster **during the opponent's declare attackers step**, after attackers have been declared but before blocks. In these instances, Trickster's ability-removing text can make large and/or previous unblockable creatures very blockable. Some specific examples are:

  1. **Taking away flying/evasion** from creatures such as Dauthi Voidwalker, Inkmoth Nexus, Ledger Shredder, Brazen Borrower, Mantis Rider, Ginger Brute, and Blighted Agent, to name a few. Casting Trickster in these situations can easily lead to a 2-for-1 where we eat the opponent's attacker with one or more of our bigger blockers, or simply allow us to trade 1-for-1 with an otherwise hard-to-deal-with evasive threat.

  2. **Making creatures smaller** and eating them, such as Dragon's Rage Channeler (becomes a 1/1 without flying) and Tarmogoyf (becomes a 0/1). Note, when blocking one of these now-tiny creatures, do so with as many of your creatures as possible; if you only block with one creature, the opponent can remove your blocker and their creature will live.

- There are some creatures we might want to target with Trickster **during the opponent's upkeep**. These are ones that are typically more useful in their main phase, such as mana dorks (casting sorcery-speed spells), Ledger Shredder (getting value when the second spell is cast), Omnath, Locus of Creation (getting value on land drops), and Dryad of the Ilysian Grove (allowing an extra land drop).

- Another very common use for Trickster is to simply cast it **during our turn** to tap down a potential blocker. To interact with us the opponent needs to play at instant speed at any point during our turn, so the timing here doesn't matter, as long as we cast Trickster before the Declare Blockers step.

- Trickster can be flashed in as a third Merfolk to turn on Svyelun's Indestructible ability.

CREATURES THAT TRICKSTER PWNS

Merfolk Trickster dominates any creature whose ability text defines its power and/or toughness. In some cases, Trickster's ability can actually destroy a creature immediately! Here is a list of some **creatures that Trickster destroys:**

Territorial Kavu
Creature — Kavu
Domain — Territorial Kavu's power and toughness are each equal to the number of basic land types among lands you control.
Whenever Territorial Kavu attacks, choose one —
• Discard a card. If you do, draw a card.
• Exile up to one target card from a graveyard.
/
Construct
Token Artifact Creature — Construct
This creature gets +1/+1 for each artifact you control.
0/0
Cultivator Colossus
Creature — Plant Beast
Trample
Cultivator Colossus's power and toughness are each equal to the number of lands you control.
When Cultivator Colossus enters the battlefield, you may put a land card from your hand onto the battlefield tapped. If you do, draw a card and repeat this process.
/
Scourge of the Skyclaves
Creature — Demon
Kicker
When you cast this spell, if it was kicked, each player loses half their life, rounded up.
Scourge of the Skyclaves's power and toughness are each equal to 20 minus the highest life total among players.
/
Phantasmal Image
Creature — Illusion
You may have Phantasmal Image enter the battlefield as a copy of any creature on the battlefield, except it's an Illusion in addition to its other types and it has "When this creature becomes the target of a spell or ability, sacrifice it."
0/0
Master of Etherium
Artifact Creature — Vedalken Wizard
Master of Etherium's power and toughness are each equal to the number of artifacts you control.
Other artifact creatures you control get +1/+1.
"Only a mind unfettered with the concerns of the flesh can see the world as it truly is."
/

And some **creatures that Trickster shrinks:**

Dragon's Rage Channeler
Creature — Human Shaman
Whenever you cast a noncreature spell, surveil 1. (Look at the top card of your library. You may put that card into your graveyard.)
Delirium — As long as there are four or more card types among cards in your graveyard, Dragon's Rage Channeler gets +2/+2, has flying, and attacks each combat if able.
1/1
Tarmogoyf
Creature — Lhurgoyf
Tarmogoyf's power is equal to the number of card types among cards in all graveyards and its toughness is equal to that number plus 1.
What doesn't grow, dies. And what dies grows the tarmogoyf.
*/1+
Nishoba Brawler
Creature — Cat Warrior
Trample
Domain — Nishoba Brawler's power is equal to the number of basic land types among lands you control.
Though native to cold climates, the nishoba have adapted to more temperate environments since the Ice Age ended.
*/3
Wild Nacatl
Creature — Cat Warrior
Wild Nacatl gets +1/+1 as long as you control a Mountain.
Wild Nacatl gets +1/+1 as long as you control a Plains.
"The Cloud Nacatl sit and think, a bunch of soft paws. We are the Claws of Marisi, stalking, pouncing, drawing blood."
1/1
Elvish Reclaimer
Creature — Elf Warrior
Elvish Reclaimer gets +2/+2 as long as there are three or more land cards in your graveyard.
, , Sacrifice a land: Search your library for a land card, put it onto the battlefield tapped, then shuffle.
1/2
Serra Ascendant
Creature — Human Monk
Lifelink (Damage dealt by this creature also causes you to gain that much life.)
As long as you have 30 or more life, Serra Ascendant gets +5/+5 and has flying.
Faith in Serra is its own reward.
1/1

SYNERGIES

- Merfolk Trickster and **Harbinger of the Tides** can act as a one-two punch: Trickster taps an opponent's creature, and Harbinger bounces it!

- As mentioned above, Trickster can be flashed in as the third Merfolk to turn on **Svyelun**'s Indestructible ability. This can be timed in such a way that it will counter a removal spell on the stack targeting Svyelun!

- With **Merrow Reejerey** on the board, Trickster can be flashed in on the opponent's upkeep to tap one of their lands (or any other important permanent)! This can be used to great effect against Tron, or against any deck to simply delay a big spell for a turn.

THINGS TRICKSTER CAN'T DO

Though Merfolk Trickster is extremely versatile, there are some types of things it cannot do:

- **Trickster cannot remove P/T modifying effects**, with anything from Colossus Hammer to Groundswell to Prowess (fortunately, this will almost always be irrelevant, since Trickster also taps the creature).
- **For abilities gained** through instants/sorceries/auras/equipment (cards that give abilities typically say the creature "gains" or "has" the ability, which they can lose; cards that modify P/T say the creature "gets" +X/+Y, which they cannot lose), **time stamp order prevails:** if Trickster's ability resolves after the ability we're trying to remove, it will be removed. However, an opponent can play effects after Trickster's ability has resolved, and the creature will gain and retain those abilities.

  A great example of this is when an opponent targets their Fury with Undying Evil while we have Trickster in hand, as shown in the screenshot below (Note: this explanation is still relevant with Grief).

  If Trickster is cast with Undying Evil still on the stack, Trickster's ETB will resolve (removing double strike from Fury) before Undying Evil. Then, when Undying Evil resolves, Fury will gain and retain Undying. When Fury's Evoke trigger (which was under the Undying Evil on the stack) resolves, Fury will go to the graveyard then return to the battlefield with a +1/+1 counter. **This is incorrect sequencing with Trickster!**

  The correct way to play this is to **let the Undying Evil resolve, *then* cast Trickster** targeting Fury. In this way, Trickster's ability will remove double strike *and* undying from Fury. When the Evoke trigger resolves, Fury will stay in the graveyard!

- Trickster's ability **targets** a creature, so we can't use it to tap and remove abilities from creatures with **hexproof**, such as Slippery Bogle or Striped Riverwinder, or protection from blue, such as Goblin Piledriver or Etched Champion. (Note: Trickster *can* target Emrakul, the Aeon's Torn, as it has protection from colored *spells*, and Trickster uses an *ability*, not a spell.)

- **Trickster can not prevent the abilities of Dryad of the Ilysian Grove or Magus of the Moon.** (This is a complicated ruling related to "layers;" it's enough for you to know it simply doesn't work.)

- **Trickster can't prevent copying combos** such as Kiki/Resto and Saheeli/Felidar, because even if a creature has its abilities removed, a copy of that creature will have its original abilities as printed on the card, enabling the combo to continue. (Note: Trickster *can* prevent Kiki/Exarch, as Kiki never leaves and re-enters the battlefield in that case.)

- **Trickster's ability can not "stifle" abilities as they're being activated or triggered.** For example, if an opponent activates Griselbrand's ability to draw seven cards, that ability goes on the stack and there's nothing Trickster can do to stop it from resolving. Trickster can certainly target Griselbrand, but Griselbrand won't be tapped and lose his abilities until the opponent is done resolving instant-speed things on top of Trickster on the stack. When a creature with an ETB ability enters the battlefield, that ability goes on the stack immediately; Trickster cannot stop it from triggering, nor from resolving.

- Because it can't "stifle" abilities, **Trickster can *never* prevent upkeep abilities** from going on the stack with creatures such as Dark Confidant or Huntmaster of the Fells. Upkeep abilities are placed on the stack before priority is received by either player.

- To explain this further: Trickster's text reads, "target creature... loses all abilities until end of turn." This language is confusingly similar but **functionally very different from Flickerwisp**'s text, "at the beginning of the next end step." If Flickerwisp enters the battlefield during the end step, the "beginning of the end step" has already passed for the current turn, so the exiled permanent will remain in exile through the next turn. If Trickster enters the battlefield during the end step, the "end of turn" hasn't happened yet - that occurs at the cleanup step, which comes after the end step. So, if you target Dark Confidant during your own end step with the hope that his upkeep trigger will remain turned off during the opponent's next turn, Trickster's effect will actually wear off before then, during our cleanup step.

- For the same reason, we also can't flash Trickster in on our opponent's end step to shut off one of their creatures' abilities for our next turn; Trickster's ability will have worn off by the time we untap. An example where this would be relevant is against Humans, where the opponent controls a Meddling Mage naming a card we want to cast. Normally, we want to flash in our creatures to have them as attackers the following turn, but if we play Trickster on our opponent's turn, we can't cast the spell the Meddling Mage is naming on our turn. We can choose between playing Trickster on the opponent's end step, tapping a creature, and having the Trickster as an attacker on our turn; or waiting until our turn to play Trickster, targeting Meddling Mage, and casting the spell it was naming (but Trickster will have summoning sickness).

MATCHUP-SPECIFIC USES FOR TRICKSTER

There are many unique interactions with Merfolk Trickster. Below is a list of some of the most impactful ones to look out for in various matchups across the format (with particularly powerful interactions highlighted).

Rhinos

- Tap Rhinos and other creatures to gain time.

Yawgmoth

- Tap mana dorks during their upkeep to slow them down.
- Target creatures with undying after attacks are declared to remove undying, block, and keep them dead.
- Tap potential blockers to create favorable attacks at the opponent and/or at Grist, the Hunger Tide.

Mono-Green Tron

- Target a Wurmcoil Engine in response to a cracked Oblivion Stone to prevent the opponent from getting tokens. (We lose Trickster in the process, but trading a 2/2 for two 3/3 tokens is a great deal.)
- Tap big creatures.

Blue/Red Murktide

- Target DRC after it attacks to remove flying, shrink it, and block it (double block if possible).
- Tap Ledger Shredder in the opponent's upkeep to prevent them from conniving.
- Target Ledger Shredder after it attacks for favorable surprise blocks, if it's small enough.
- Tap down Murktide to gain time (this idea applies to many creatures in many decks).

Amulet Titan

- Target Cultivator Colossus to kill it instantly.
- Target a Construct token to kill it instantly.
- Targeting Dryad of the Ilysian Grove will *NOT* stop it from giving the opponent's lands all basic types!!
- Target Dryad during the opponent's upkeep to prevent the extra land drop.
- Target Azusa, Lost but Seeking with a bounce land trigger on the stack to prevent extra land drops.
- Tap Primeval Titan at the beginning of combat to prevent its attack trigger.

Hammertime

- Target a Construct token to kill it instantly.
- Tap down any creature with Colossus Hammer equipped at the beginning of combat.
- With an equipment on the stack, target Puresteel Paladin to prevent card drawing and equipping.
- Target Giver of Runes to force an activation, then Dismember an important target with Giver's ability on the stack.
- Target Esper Sentinel before casting a non-creature spell to prevent drawing.
- Tap down Kaldra Compleat's germ to gain time. If you want to trade with it, let it attack then target it with Trickster. It will lose Indestructible, First Strike, Trample, and the rest of its text.

Living End

- Target Waker of Waves to make our creatures more powerful.
- Target Grief to remove menace.

Hardened Scales

- Target a Construct token to kill it instantly.
- Target fliers for surprise blocks.
- Target Arcbound Ravager to force the opponent to act now (useful if we are holding up more interaction to deal with whatever their Ravager plan ends up being).
- Target Walking Ballista to force the opponent to act now (useful if we have ways to stymie whatever they might do with Ballista, like using Vial to put a lord into play).

Burn

- Tap down any creature at the beginning of combat to gain time.

Domain Zoo

- Target Territorial Kavu to kill it instantly.
- Target Wild Nacatl after it attacks to shrink it and block/eat it.
- Target Nishoba Brawler after it attacks to shrink it and block/eat it.
- Target Tarmogoyf after it attacks to shrink it and block/eat it.
- Watch for green mana representing Veil of Summer.

Right: *This attacking Tarmogoyf is about to be eaten by a Merfolk Trickster.*

Creativity

- If there's a Reflection of Kiki-Jiki token on board, tap it with Creativity or Archon on the stack to prevent the Archon from being copied after it enters the battlefield..
- Tap a Goblin token to prevent the opponent from ramping.
- Tap Archon to lose more slowly.

Mono-Black Coffers

- Target Sheoldred in the opponent's upkeep to prevent them from gaining life.
- Target Sheoldred in our upkeep to prevent us from losing life.

Scam

- After Undying Evil (or any similar spell) resolves, target the Undying creature with Trickster to take away the undying text so the creature stays in the graveyard.
- Target Dauthi Voidwalker after it attacks to take away Shadow and block it.

Omnath Control

- Target Omnath in response to its ETB trigger to prevent landfall value.
- Target Omnath in response to the opponent cracking a fetchland to prevent landfall value.
- Target Solitude to remove lifelink.

Death's Shadow

- Tap their creatures to gain time.
- If you're going to target Death's Shadow, it will almost always be correct to do so at the beginning of combat step to tap it down and prevent it from attacking; when Trickster removes Death's Shadow's ability, it becomes a 13/13 until the end of turn.

Mill

- Target crabs during the opponent's upkeep to prevent landfall value.

Grixis Control

- Play on the opponent's end step to force counterspells.

UWx Control

- Target Solitude to remove lifelink.
- Play on the opponent's end step to force counterspells.

Infect

- In this matchup, it is often best to declare no blocks, in order to bait out pump spells. Once the pump spells resolve, we can then cast Trickster and remove infect from the pumped creature, making the damage hit our life total rather than give us poison counters. Since the Infect deck doesn't attack our life total, this effectively counters their attack and pump spell(s).
- Another way to go about things is to cast Trickster targeting one of their Infect creatures after the opponent declares attackers, threatening to block and eat the creature. If they spend a pump spell to save their creature, we can often respond by Dismembering the creature (if not, it is still often reasonable to just trade a Trickster for a pump spell).

Merfolk (Mirror)

- Creature interaction is crucial in the mirror. Think very carefully to get maximum value out of Trickster.
- Target the opponent's Islandwalk lord to take away Islandwalk and block all their creatures.
- Target any lord to reduce the power and toughness of the opponent's creatures.
- If we control Lord of Atlantis and the opponent's attacker has Islandwalk from it, Trickster will remove Islandwalk from the attacker. However, it will *not* remove the +1/+1 effect, as it isn't an ability.
- Target Vodalian Hexcatcher (or Cursecatcher) before casting Dismember to avoid any taxes.
- Target Svyelun to prevent card draw and/or before casting Dismember on other Merfolk to avoid Ward 1.

CHAPTER 9: *Tishana's Tidebinder Strategy*

THE ROLE OF TISHANA'S TIDEBINDER

Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, that permanent loses all abilities for as long as Tishana's Tidebinder remains on the battlefield. (Mana abilities can't be targeted.)
3/2

Merfolk players knew from the moment Tishana's Tidebinder was unveiled that it would be amazing in our deck; its "stifle" ability (countering activated or triggered abilities) had many clear and obvious applications.

One common initial impression, however, was that the 3mv cost might make it too clunky to include as a full playset alongside Svyelun. But as people tested and thought more deeply about Tidebinder, more and more uses revealed themselves. We soon realized we wanted as many copies as possible! It also became clear that it would not just bring change to Modern Merfolk, but to the *entire Modern format*.

Simply put: **Tidebinder can do almost anything we want it to do.** It is a large flash threat that counters and shuts down many of the most impactful cards in Modern.

STIFLE + EXTENDED TRICKSTER ABILITY + 3/2 FLASH BODY

To get to a basic appreciation of Tishana's Tidebinder, one has to isolate its three components:

1. **It is a 3/2 Merfolk with flash.** Being able to play Tidebinder at instant speed synergizes very well with all the other flash spells and effects in the deck. And its 3/2 base stats mean it can swing very hard in combination with lords and Islandwalk.
2. **It can counter ("stifle") an activated or triggered ability.** These types of abilities abound in Modern (see "Matchup-Specific Uses" below), and countering an important one can easily swing a game in our favor.
3. **It can shut down *all* abilities of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker** when it counters one of their abilities, for as long as Tidebinder remains on the battlefield. This effect can be compared to Merfolk Trickster's ability, but with the incredible potential to last for many turns.

No other card in the history of Magic has combined this kind of broad "stifle" effect with a permanent removal of abilities - much less on a tribal flash body.

THE BANE OF FETCHLANDS

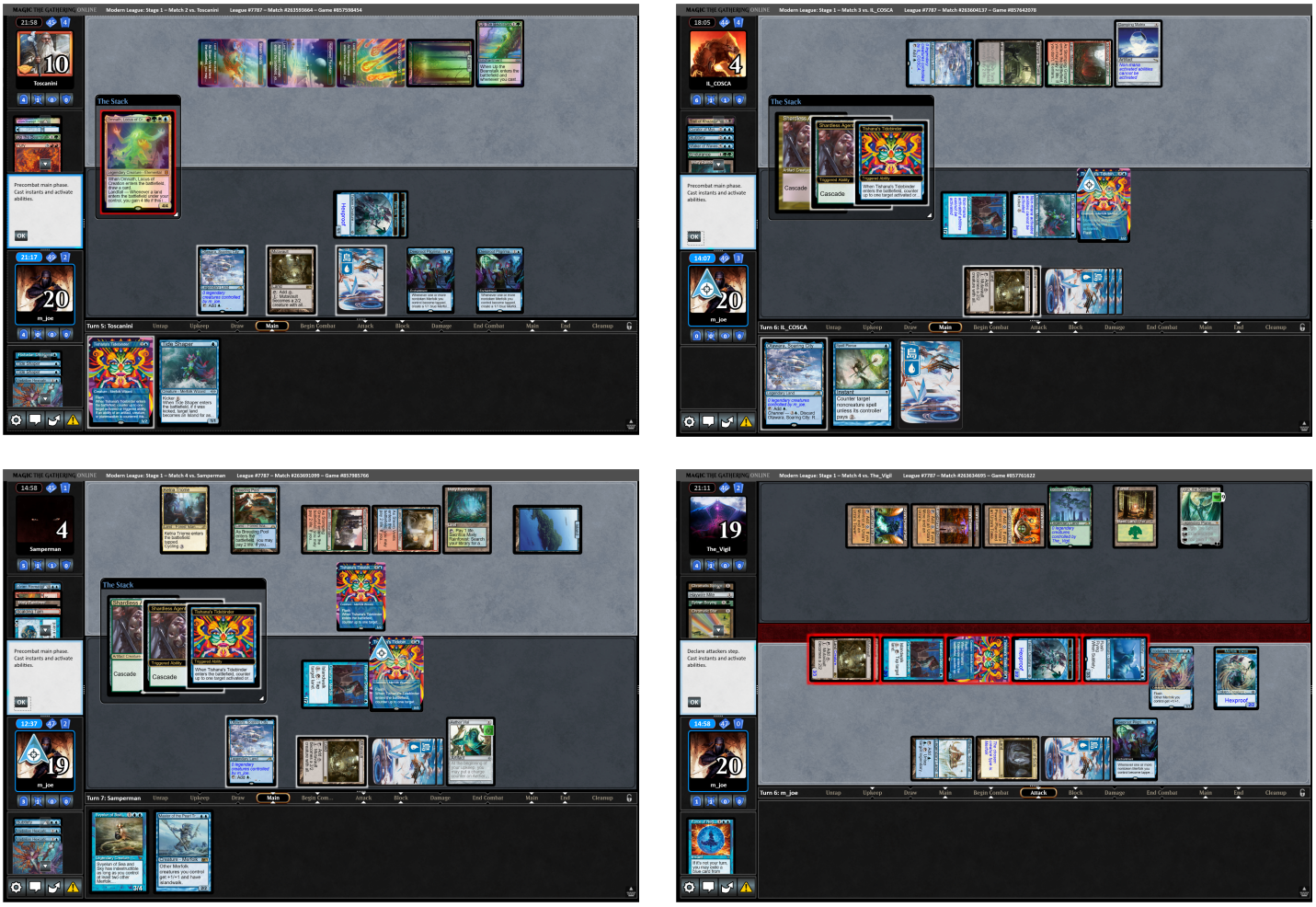
While many targets for Tidebinder's ability are listed below, one case is more common than all the rest and deserves special attention: **Tidebinder can counter a fetchland activation!** Fetchlands are all over Modern, which makes countering one a sort of "floor," or base case for Tidebinder's ability. Having the equivalent of land destruction stapled to a flash 3/2 Merfolk is rather extraordinary!

OTHER COMMON APPLICATIONS

Orcish Bowmasters, The One Ring, Cascade spells, Evoke Elementals, Channel lands, Urza's Saga, Primeval Titan, Engineered Explosives, and Dragon's Rage Channeler are a few prevalent, high-value uses. See below for more!

TIDEBINDER IN ACTION

Below are a few screenshots showing Tidebinder performing well in a wide variety of challenging circumstances.



Left-to-right, top-to-bottom: Tidebinder about to counter an Omnath's ETB ability; Tidebinder countering a Cascade trigger against Living End, allowing us to win the next turn; Tidebinder countering a Cascade trigger against Rhinos, allowing us to win with Islandwalk the next turn; Tishana attacking for exactly lethal after countering an Ugin activation the previous turn.

THINGS TIDEBINDER CAN'T DO

Though Tishana's Tidebinder is extremely versatile, there are some types of things it cannot do:

- **If Tidebinder counters an ability that triggers as a permanent spell is cast, that permanent will still enter the battlefield with all its abilities.** One of the most prevalent examples of such a cast trigger in Modern is Ulamog, the Ceaseless Hunger in Mono-Green Tron. If we counter its cast trigger (exile two target permanents), Ulamog still enters with Indestructible and its attack triggered ability intact. This is because Tidebinder's ability checks to see if the source of the ability being countered is an artifact, creature, or planeswalker as it resolves. When Tidebinder's ability resolves, however, it sees Ulamog on the stack as a *spell*, not as a *creature*. Here is a **great video** of a judge explaining the ruling. (Other examples of cast triggers include: Bloodbraid Elf, Shardless Agent, Cityscape Leveler, and both Emrakuls.)

- **Tidebinder only has a lasting effect on three permanent types: artifacts, creatures, and planeswalkers.** It is very easy to forget this, and to think we can remove all abilities from lands and enchantments. This can lead to pretty bad misplays, so be careful!

MATCHUP-SPECIFIC USES FOR TIDEBINDER

Because there are *so many* targets for Tidebinder's ability in Modern, below is a simple list of all the cards in each matchup that can be affected by Tidebinder. ***Remember - abilities of lands and enchantments (and spells) will not be removed entirely; only the single trigger or activation will be countered!*** Examples where this limitation is relevant are highlighted in red. This expansive list should simply show you how relevant and flexible Tidebinder is in virtually every matchup. For specific interesting and tricky interactions (highlighted in blue), please see the "Tips & Tricks" section below.

Rhinos

- **CREATURES:** Shardless Agent, Tishana's Tidebinder, Subtlety,
- **NON-CREATURES:** Violent Outburst, Lorien Revealed, Crashing Footfalls
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Triomes, Boseiju, Otawara

Yawgmoth

- **CREATURES:** Gilded Goose, Young Wolf, Blood Artist, Hapatra, Orcish Bowmasters, Strangleroot Geist, Sheoldred, Yawgmoth, Ignoble Hierarch
- **NON-CREATURES:** Agatha's Soul Cauldron, Grist
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Nurturing Peatland, Takenuma, Boseiju, Pendelhaven

Mono-Green Tron

- **CREATURES:** Wurmcoil Engine, Walking Ballista, Haywire Mite, Ulamog
- **NON-CREATURES:** Karn(s), Ugin(s), Expedition Map, Oblivion Stone, The One Ring, Relic of Progenitus, Liquimetal Coating, Cityscape Leveler, Sundering Titan, Portal to Phyrexia
- **LANDS:** Boseiju, Urza's Saga, Blast Zone

Blue/Red Murktide

- **CREATURES:** Dragon's Rage Channeler, Ragavan, Murktide Regent (the last ability), Subtlety,
- **NON-CREATURES:** Engineered Explosives, Mishra's Bauble, Fable of the Mirror-Breaker
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Otawara, Fiery Islet

Amulet Titan

- **CREATURES:** Primeval Titan, Arboreal Grazer, Cultivator Colossus
- **NON-CREATURES:** The One Ring, Expedition Map, , Spelunking, Amulet of Vigor,
- **LANDS:** Boseiju, Tolaria West, Urza's Saga, Valakut, Radiant Fountain, Slayers' Stronghold, Sunhome, The Mycosynth Gardens

Hammertime

- **CREATURES:** Esper Sentinel, Gingerbrute, Giver of Runes, Puresteel Paladin, Stoneforge Mystic
- **NON-CREATURES:** Colossus Hammer, Shadowspear, Sigarda's Aid, Forge Anew, Kaldra Compleat
- **LANDS:** Eiganjo, Urza's Saga, Inkmoth Nexus

Living End

- **CREATURES:** Shardless Agent, Architects of Will, Curator of Mysteries, Street Wraith, Generous Ent, Oliphaunt, Waker of Waves, Foundation Breaker, Grief, Subtlety
- **NON-CREATURES:** Violent Outburst
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Boseiju, Otawara

Hardened Scales

- **CREATURES:** Hangarback Walker, Walking Ballista, Zabaz, Arcbound Ravager, Haywire Mite, Patchwork Automaton
- **NON-CREATURES:** Welding Jar, Shadowspear, Ozolith(s), Agatha's Soul Cauldron
- **LANDS:** Boseiju, Urza's Saga, Inkmoth Nexus, Pendelhaven

Burn

- **CREATURES:** Monastery Swiftspear
- **NON-CREATURES:** Roiling Vortex, Rift Bolt
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Sunbaked Canyon, Fiery Islet

Domain Zoo

- **CREATURES:** Ragavan, Orcish Bowmasters, Shardless Agent, Bloodbraid Elf, Territorial Kavu, General Ferrous Rokiric, Solitude
- **NON-CREATURES:** Leyline Binding
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Triomes

Creativity

- **CREATURES:** Archon of Cruelty, Goblin Token, Reflection of Kiki-Jiki, Emrakul
- **NON-CREATURES:** Wrenn and Six, Teferi, Leyline Binding, Fable of the Mirror-Breaker
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Boseiju, Triomes, Dwarven Mine

Mono-Black Coffers

- **CREATURES:** Orcish Bowmasters, Sheoldred, Troll of Khazad-dum, Archon of Cruelty, Cityscape Leveler, Sundering Titan, Emrakul
- **NON-CREATURES:** Karn, The One Ring, Liquimetal Coating
- **LANDS:** Field of Ruin, Demolition Field

Scam

- **CREATURES:** Ragavan, Dauthi Voidwalker, Orcish Bowmasters, Sheoldred, Grief,
- **NON-CREATURES:** Not Dead After All, Undying Evil, Engineered Explosives, Fable of the Mirror-Breaker, Hidetsugu Consumes All
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Takenuma, Mount Doom, Castle Locthwain

Omnath Control

- **CREATURES:** Shardless Agent, Omnath, Bloodbraid Elf, Solitude
- **NON-CREATURES:** Teferi, Jace, Lorien Revealed, Leyline Binding, The One Ring
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Triomes, Boseiju

Death's Shadow

- **CREATURES:** Orcish Bowmasters, Snapcaster Mage, Murktide Regent, Ragavan, Dragon's Rage Channeler, Grief, Subtlety
- **NON-CREATURES:** Engineered Explosives, Mishra's Bauble, Fable of the Mirror-Breaker
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Otawara, Fiery Islet

Mill

- **CREATURES:** Hedron Crab, Ruin Crab
- **NON-CREATURES:** Jace, Fractured Sanity, Gadwick's First Duel
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Field of Ruin, Mikokoro, Oboro, Shelldock Isle

Grixis Control

- **CREATURES:** Ragavan, Orcish Bowmasters, Snapcaster Mage, Tishana's Tidebinder, Sheoldred, Subtlety
- **NON-CREATURES:** Engineered Explosives
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Otawara,Triomes, Mutavault

UWx Control

- **CREATURES:** Solitude, Subtlety
- **NON-CREATURES:** Teferi, Leyline Binding, The One Ring, Lorien Revealed, Chalice of the Void
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Triomes

Infect

- **CREATURES:** Venerated Rotpriest, Spellskite, Subtlety, Noble Hierarch
- **NON-CREATURES:** Teferi
- **LANDS:** Fetchlands, Boseiju, Waterlogged Grove, Inkmoth Nexus, Pendelhaven

Merfolk (Mirror)

- **CREATURES:** Tide Shaper, Rishadan Dockhand, Merfolk Trickster, Harbinger of the Tides, Silvergill Adept, Vodalian Hexcatcher, Tishana's Tidebinder, Svyelun, Subtlety
- **NON-CREATURES:** Aether Vial, Lorien Revealed, Deeproot Pilgrimage, Spreading Seas
- **LANDS:** Mutavault, Otawara, Waterlogged Grove, Minamo, Oboro

TIPS AND TRICKS

As you can see above, targets for Tidebinder's ability abound. Many of them are relatively obvious, with clear, intuitive interactions. However, many others are relatively obscure, counter-intuitive, and/or complicated. Below is a fascinating list of some nonobvious interactions. But let's start with some fundamentals:

- **It is essential to understand (and remember in our matches) that triggered and activated abilities on the stack are wholly separate from the permanent (or spell) from which they originated.** When you target an ability on the stack, you are *not* targeting the permanent (or spell).
    - An illuminating example of this is how Tidebinder interacts with **Patchwork Automaton** (PA) and its abilities. PA actually has two triggered abilities: Ward 2, and the ability that grants it +1/+1 counters. (Though many protective effects like Hexproof, Indestructible, and Protection from Color(s) are *static* abilities, Ward is a *triggered* ability and, as such, uses the stack.)
    - In a scenario where an opponent casts an artifact spell with PA on the battlefield, PA's +1/+1 ability would trigger. If we target this ability with Tidebinder (to "stifle" it), PA's Ward 2 ability *would not trigger!* **Remember: when you target an ability on the stack, you are *not* targeting the permanent from which it originated.** In this example, the +1/+1 ability would be countered by Tidebinder, and all of PA's abilities would be removed.
    - If we target the opponent's PA (with Dismember or Trickster, for example), PA's Ward 2 ability would trigger and be put on the stack. We could then cast or Vial in Tidebinder to target the Ward 2 trigger. This would counter the trigger, all of PA's abilities would be removed, and **our interaction (Dismember, Trickster, etc) would resolve without having to pay Ward 2.**
    - Two other examples that demonstrate the separation of abilities on the stack from the permanents from which they originated are **General Ferrous Rokiric** and **Thrun, the Last Troll.** Though both these creatures have some form of Hexproof (a static ability that prevents opponents from targeting that creature), Tidebinder *can* target and counter Rokiric's triggered ability or Thrun's activated ability. Doing so would remove all abilities from the creature, including Hexproof, making it targetable.
- Understanding the separation between abilities on the stack and the source from which they originated is essential for the next card we'll look at: **Veil of Summer.** It reads, *"Draw a card if an opponent has cast a blue or black spell this turn.* ***Spells you control*** *can't be countered this turn.* ***You and permanents you control*** *gain hexproof from blue and from black until end of turn."* This is a spell that does so much for so little that players have learned to instinctively cast it whenever a blue or black deck does anything interactive against them. However, if they cast it in response to Tidebinder, it won't help them much; Tidebinder's ability (a) does not target spells, (b) does not target opponents, and (c) does not target permanents. If we cast a blue spell this turn, the opponent *will* draw a card off of Veil, but **Veil will have no effect on Tidebinder's ability.**
    - A similar example is **Surge of Salvation** in Hammer Time. Hammer players are used to snapping off Surge whenever their opponent tries to interact with them. Again, this effect does nothing against Tidebinder's ability.
- As mentioned under "Things Tidebinder Can't Do," remember that **countering a creature spell's cast trigger does not remove the abilities of the creature when it arrives on the battlefield.**

- **If Tidebinder is removed with its ETB ability on the stack** targeting the ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker, that source will *not* lose all its abilities at any point due to Tidebinder's ETB ability.

- **Reflexive triggers** are triggers inside other spells or abilities. These can be hard to spot and/or hard to understand how Tidebinder should be optimally timed to counter them.

    - **Grist, the Hunger Tide**'s -2 loyalty ability reads: *"You may sacrifice a creature. **When you do**, destroy target creature or planeswalker."* Because it is worded like this, nothing is targeted as the -2 ability is put on the stack; Grist's controller is simply presented with an option to sacrifice a creature. If they do, the loyalty ability finishes resolving and leaves the stack, and the **reflexive trigger** is immediately put onto stack (and the opponent then chooses a target creature or planeswalker). If we counter the -2 loyalty ability directly with Tidebinder, the opponent will never have a chance to sacrifice a creature. As such, we virtually always want to wait until the reflexive trigger is put on the stack (so the opponent will sacrifice one of their creatures), and target the reflexive triggered ability with Tidebinder.

    - **Calibrated Blast** reads: *"Reveal cards from the top of your library until you reveal a nonland card. Put the revealed cards on the bottom of your library in a random order. **When you reveal** a nonland card this way, Calibrated Blast deals damage equal to that card's mana value to any target."* Note the similarity to how Grist's -2 ability is worded: after something happens in the first half, the words ***"when you [do something]"*** appear in the second half, and targets are chosen in the second half. When Calibrated Blast resolves and a nonland card is revealed, a trigger is placed on the stack with a target to deal damage to. This trigger can be countered by Tidebinder.

- **Creatures cast with Evoke costs** have two separate triggers (which can be put on the stack in any order by the controller of the creature): the trigger to sacrifice the creature because the Evoke cost had been paid, and the ETB ability.

    - **When an opponent casts an Evoked creature**, we want to target the ETB trigger with Tidebinder's ability. For example, we would target Grief's discard ability. This ability would be countered, and the sacrifice ability would still resolve, putting the creature in the graveyard.

    - **When we cast an Evoked creature**, we want to target the sacrifice trigger with Tidebinder's ability. This way, the creature's ETB ability would still resolve, and the creature would stay on the battlefield. This scenario can be relevant for Merfolk while evoking **Subtlety**, if we could make use of an extra vanilla 3/3 (remember, as long as we control Tidebinder, Subtlety would lose all abilities, including flying, after we counter its sacrifice trigger).

- **Some cards with cycling have abilities that trigger when they're cycled.** When the Cycle costs are paid and the card is discarded, the Cycle activated ability is put on the stack (if it resolves, it will draw a card). This causes the "When you cycle [this card]" triggered ability to be put on the stack, on top of the Cycle activated ability. The important thing to understand here is that **there are two separate abilities on the stack, and countering one with Tidebinder does not affect the other one.**

    - One example of such a card in Modern is **Shark Typhoon.** When the opponent cycles Shark Typhoon, they pay X1U and discard Shark Typhoon, and the Cycle ability is put onto the stack (if it resolves, it will draw a card). This causes the second ability, *"When you cycle Shark Typhoon, create an X/X blue Shark creature token with flying,"* to be put on the stack above the Cycle ability. We can choose to target either ability with Tidebinder's ability

    - Another example of such a card in Modern is **Fractured Sanity.** Again, when the opponent cycles the card, we can choose to target EITHER the card draw OR the mill effect with Tidebinder's ability; they are two separate abilities on the stack.

- **Kaldra Compleat**, with the Living Weapon ability, has several interesting interactions with Tidebinder. From the Comprehensive Rules: *"Living weapon" means "When this Equipment enters the battlefield, create a 0/0 black Phyrexian Germ creature token, then attach this Equipment to it."* Since Living Weapon is a triggered ability, Tidebinder's ability can counter it, **preventing the 0/0 Germ from ever being made.** This leaves the big equipment unequipped on the battlefield.
    - Kaldra gives a different triggered ability to the equipped creature: *"Whenever this creature deals combat damage to a creature, exile that creature."* If we block the equipped creature and combat damage is dealt to our creature, we can counter this ability when it triggers. This would remove First Strike, Trample, Indestructible, and Haste from the creature (note, however, that the +5/+5 granted by Kaldra Compleat to the creature would continue to apply, as it is not an ability and thus would not be removed by Tidebinder's ability). In this case, the source of the trigger that was countered by Tidebinder was the equipped creature, and not Kaldra itself. So Kaldra would retain all of its abilities, but they wouldn't apply to the creature as long as Tidebinder remains on the battlefield (timestamps would control the status of the creature's abilities).
    - If the opponent activates Kaldra's equip ability and we counter it with Tidebinder's ability, Kaldra will lose all its abilities as long as Tidebinder remains on the battlefield.
    - One other equipment with Living Weapon worth mentioning here is **Batterskull.** If we counter Living Weapon and Batterskull's abilities are all removed, we have to remain vigilant if the opponent tries to bounce it back to hand later in the game! Point at Tidebinder and say "No!"
- Don't be lured into casting Tidebinder in response to **Dress Down**'s ETB ability - Tidebinder will have no abilities and won't be able to counter anything!
- **The One Ring** can be a very difficult card for Merfolk to deal with, but Tidebinder makes it less daunting. This legendary artifact has two abilities we would generally like to counter: (a) an ETB triggered ability giving its controller protection from everything until their next turn, and (b) an activated ability that lets them draw cards. Given Merfolk's tempo gameplan, **it is generally much better (if possible) to counter the ETB protection ability,** so we don't miss an entire attack on our next turn. If we choose this path, the opponent will still be able to activate the card draw ability to draw a single card before Tidebinder's ability resolves. But, once it does resolve, all of The One Ring's abilities will be removed as long as Tidebinder remains on the battlefield.
- Spells exiled with **Suspend** have two triggered abilities: the first removes a time counter during upkeep, and the second casts the spell if there are no time counters remaining. **We want to counter the second triggered ability, to prevent the opponent from casting the spell.** From the Comprehensive Rules: *"If the second triggered ability of Suspend is countered, the card can't be cast. It remains in the exile zone without any time counters on it for the rest of the game, and it's no longer considered suspended."*
- As explained in the previous chapter on Merfolk Trickster, **removing abilities from certain creatures can actually *kill* the creature.** The list of creatures that Tidebinder can kill in this way is shorter, because the creature needs to have an ability that Tidebinder can target. If Tidebinder targets the ETB ability of **Cultivator Colossus** it will die, and if Tidebinder targets the attack trigger of **Territorial Kavu** it will die.

- **Chalice of the Void** triggers whenever a player casts a spell with mana value equal to the number of charge counters on it. Tidebinder can counter such a trigger and turn the Chalice off.

- **Storm** is a triggered ability that reads, *"When you cast this spell, copy it for each spell cast before it this turn. You may choose new targets for the copies."* Tidebinder can counter a Storm trigger (however, note that the actual spell will resolve, it just won't create the Storm copies).

- Mono-Green Tron plays both **Chromatic Sphere and Chromatic Star.** Both artifacts have mana abilities, which can't be targeted by Tidebinder's ability, and both draw a card. While the card draw is embedded in Chromatic Sphere's mana ability and thus can't be countered, **Chromatic Star's card draw trigger is separate from its mana ability and can be countered by Tidebinder.**

- **Urza's Saga** is easily one of the most powerful lands in Modern, and, thankfully, Tidebinder can help us interact with it. Urza's Saga has three separate triggers, each of which occurs as a Chapter counter is placed on it: (a) a trigger that gives it a mana ability, (b) a trigger that gives it the ability to make constructs, and (c) a trigger that allows its controller to search their library for an artifact and put it onto the battlefield. **Tidebinder can target and counter any of these triggers** (as well as the activated ability making a construct, if the Saga has already gained that ability), but REMEMBER! - countering abilities of lands (and enchantments, see below) does NOT remove all their abilities! As such, we have to choose carefully from among Saga's various abilities when we have Tidebinder in hand.

- As just mentioned above, countering abilities of enchantments with Tidebinder does *not* remove all their abilities. I have repeated this several times in this chapter because it is absolutely critical to remember. **Roiling Vortex** in Modern Burn is an example of a relevant enchantment. It deals 1 damage to us during our upkeep, and 5 damage if we ever cast a spell without paying any mana (Force of Negation or Subtlety). **An example of a potential misplay with Tidebinder** would be to flash it in during our upkeep to counter the 1 damage, wrongly thinking that doing so would erase all of Vortex's abilities. A potentially better way to play would be to keep up Vial on 3, with Force and Tidebinder in hand, as we pass to the opponent's turn. If we cast Force by pitching a blue card (not spending mana), Roiling Vortex would trigger and we could respond by Vialing in Tidebinder to counter the trigger, saving us 5 life. The exact best play will always vary depending on particular circumstances, but **the important thing to remember here is that Tidebinder doesn't remove abilities from enchantments.**

- **Inkmoth Nexus** is an example of a land with an activated ability (turning it into a creature) we can counter with Tidebinder.The majority of the time we counter this ability with Tidebinder, the land will retain all its abilities (as, again, Tidebinder does not remove abilities from lands). However, there is a case where we *can* remove this land's abilities. The Hammer Time deck often activates Inkmoth's ability, turning it into a creature, then equips it with Colossus Hammer. The Hammer causes the Inkmoth to lose flying, but activating Inkmoth's ability a second time would cause it to *regain* flying. If we counter this second activation, all of Inkmoth's abilities (including its ability to tap for mana) will be removed, since it was a creature when the ability was put on the stack. (Note that the Inkmoth will remain a 1/1 creature until the end of the turn.)

- Against Creativity, we can counter the ETB trigger of **Dwarven Mine** with Tidebinder to prevent it from creating a Dwarf. In general, keeping their board clear of creatures is a good way to stay in the game. If the opponent cracks a fetchland later in the game, we might even consider allowing the fetch activation to resolve so they find the Mine, then counter its ETB. While this passes up on the opportunity to counter the fetchland, it might run them out of Dwarven Mines.

- **Noble Hierarch** and **Ignoble Hierarch** are mana dorks with Exalted. Exalted is a triggered ability that reads, *"Whenever a creature you control attacks alone, that creature gets +1/+1 until end of turn."* Though mana abilities are normally untouchable by Tidebinder, the mana abilities of these creatures are removed (along with the Exalted ability) if we counter an Exalted trigger with Tidebinder.

- **Chandra, Torch of Defiance** has a +1 loyalty ability that adds two red mana. Tidebinder can counter this, as it is not a mana ability! From the Comprehensive Rules: *"An activated ability is a mana ability if it meets all of the following criteria: it doesn't require a target (see rule 115.6), it could add mana to a player's mana pool when it resolves, and* ***it's not a loyalty ability."***

- The manner in which Tidebinder interacts with **Amulet of Vigor** is somewhat counterintuitive but very powerful, so it merits a mention here. When the opponent plays a tapped Karoo land (Selesnya Sanctuary, for example) with Amulet on the battlefield, two triggers are put onto the stack: (a) the Karoo land's ETB trigger requiring them to return a land to their hand, and (b) the Amulet's trigger to untap the Karoo land. **We want to counter the Amulet's trigger.** This will prevent the Karoo land from untapping, they'll still have to return a land to hand, and the Amulet will no longer trigger for subsequent tapped lands entering the battlefield.

- If an opponent's Tidebinder counters one of our creatures' abilities while we have an **Islandwalk lord** out, our creature will lose Islandwalk until we play another Islandwalk lord. Our creature will retain the +1/+1, however, since that is not an ability.

- If an opponent's Tidebinder counters **Svyelun**'s card draw trigger, she will lose all her abilities, and all our other Merfolk will lose Ward 1. Play carefully!

- And, finally, if your opponent keeps **shuffling their hand** super loudly while you're thinking you can use your Tidebinder to make them stop.

CHAPTER 10: *Svyelun of Sea and Sky Strategy*

THE ROLE OF SVYELUN

Svyelun of Sea and Sky
Legendary Creature — Merfolk God
Svyelun of Sea and Sky has indestructible as long as you control at least two other Merfolk.
Whenever Svyelun attacks, draw a card.
Other Merfolk you control have ward.
(Whenever another Merfolk you control becomes the target of a spell or ability an opponent controls, counter it unless that player pays.)
Illus. Seb McKinnon
3/4

Svyelun is more capable of taking over a game than any other creature in Modern Merfolk. The value that is packed into the card for three mana is exceptional.

In the past, we rued having to play a fragile 3-drop like Merrow Reejerey, which so often got killed for one mana (Lightning Bolt, Fatal Push, or any other efficient removal spell), putting us far behind on tempo. Svyelun, with her four toughness and occasional indestructibility, however, is far harder for opponents to remove.

In addition to being hard to remove, Svyelun gives our other Merfolk ward 1, making them *all* harder to remove. This is an effect the deck had always looked for, but previously had to settle for options either outside the tribe (Kira, Great Glass-Spinner) or outside mono-blue (Unsettled Mariner).

Finally, Svyelun draws a card every time she attacks. If we get to attack with her even once or twice, the value can simply win games. All of these attributes in one well-costed package make Svyelun an incredible late-game top-deck for Modern Merfolk; she is often able to single-handedly take over a game. This is something the deck, historically made up entirely of tiny creatures dependent upon synergy, has lacked.

WHEN TO PUT SVYELUN INTO PLAY

We typically want to put Svyelun into play as soon as possible, for a number of reasons. First, she makes the most efficient use of our mana on turn three. Second, the sooner we can get her on the battlefield, the sooner we can begin attacking and drawing cards. Third, as a legendary creature we have four copies of in the deck, it isn't uncommon to draw multiple copies over the course of a game, and the first copy getting removed is typically not much of a setback (at least, it's worth the risk of playing her as soon as possible). Of course, we can look out for situations where leading with other Merfolk would be beneficial, and following up with Svyelun would allow her to be Indestructible as she enters the battlefield. However, as a guiding principle: play Svyelun as soon as possible!

SYNERGIES

- First, **Minamo, School at Water's Edge** can untap Svyelun after she attacks and draws a card. Having such a large, often Indestructible creature available as a blocker is excellent, and makes Minamo an auto-include.

- Next, we clearly want to keep **two other Merfolk** on the board with Svyelun whenever possible, to keep her Indestructible. Opponents will look to remove Svyelun when her "shields are down," so to speak, and there are a number of ways we can capitalize on this by responding at instant speed.

- If we only control one Merfolk other than Svyelun, we can cast either **Trickster or Hexcatcher with flash** to make Svyelun Indestructible as necessary (whether in response to removal, or to make combat favorable for us). Another way to get a Merfolk onto the battlefield at instant speed is with **Aether Vial**.

- Perhaps the trickiest way of all to establish a third Merfolk and make Svyelun Indestructible is by activating **Mutavault** when necessary. For whatever reason, opponents very often miss this on-board

interaction. The fact that Mutavault can help protect Svyelun is a huge motivation for including a full playset of the versatile manland.

The screenshot below on the left shows our opponent trying to kill Svyelun with Chandra. However, we can flash in Trickster and activate Mutavault to make Svyelun Indestructible!

The screenshot above on the right shows Svyelun's strong synergy with **Deeproot Pilgrimage.** Hexproof tokens are very difficult for the opponent to remove, so they make Svyelun's Indestructible hard to remove!

TIPS AND TRICKS

- There is a lot of room for opponents to make mistakes while playing against Svyelun. While we shouldn't *expect* mistakes, we should always be aware of the possibility. This includes being prepared to untap Svyelun with Minamo for potential blowouts (screenshot at right).
- A tricky play is to tap Mutavault for mana on our turn, but leave blue mana available on the opponent's turn. It's possible for an opponent to not consider Mutavault a threat when it's tapped down, but it can still become a Merfolk to help Svyelun.
- We can attack with Svyelun and draw cards off her trigger that are immediately relevant in combat. This is particularly strong with Aether Vial to put non-flash Merfolk into play immediately. Trickster and lords are great for helping the attack, but, often, just getting a third Merfolk onto the battlefield to make Svyelun Indestructible lis fantastic.

CHAPTER 11: *Deeproot Pilgrimage Strategy*

THE ROLE OF DEEPROOT PILGRIMAGE

Deeproot Pilgrimage
Enchantment
Whenever one or more nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped, create a 1/1 blue Merfolk creature token with hexproof.
"These glyphs are more than trail markings! They tell a story as they go. But does it end in celebration or tragedy?"

In addition to Tishana's Tidebinder, The Lost Caverns of Ixalan gave us Deeproot Pilgrimage. As of this writing, with the set becoming available only a few weeks ago, Pilgrimage is a far more contentious inclusion in the main deck compared to Tidebinder. **It introduces a new play style and new incentives to a deck that has pretty much had the same plan for over a decade,** and not everyone is on board.

What is absolutely clear from early testing is that Pilgrimage can easily win games by itself in slow, grindy matchups. The jury is still out on its role in faster matchups. Pilgrimage is easy to trigger, and makes some cards (like Mutavault and Rishadan Dockhand) significantly more valuable. Its 1/1 Hexproof Merfolk tokens can be very difficult for opponents to deal with, and these tokens have strong synergies with many of our existing cards and tactics (discussed at greater length below).

REV YOUR ENGINES!

Deeproot Pilgrimage is an engine card - after committing resources (time and mana) to get it on the battlefield, it immediately begins generating value (in the form of 1/1 Hexproof Merfolk tokens) and continues doing so as long as it goes unanswered. And it is pretty hard to answer, being an enchantment!

TEMPO BEAST

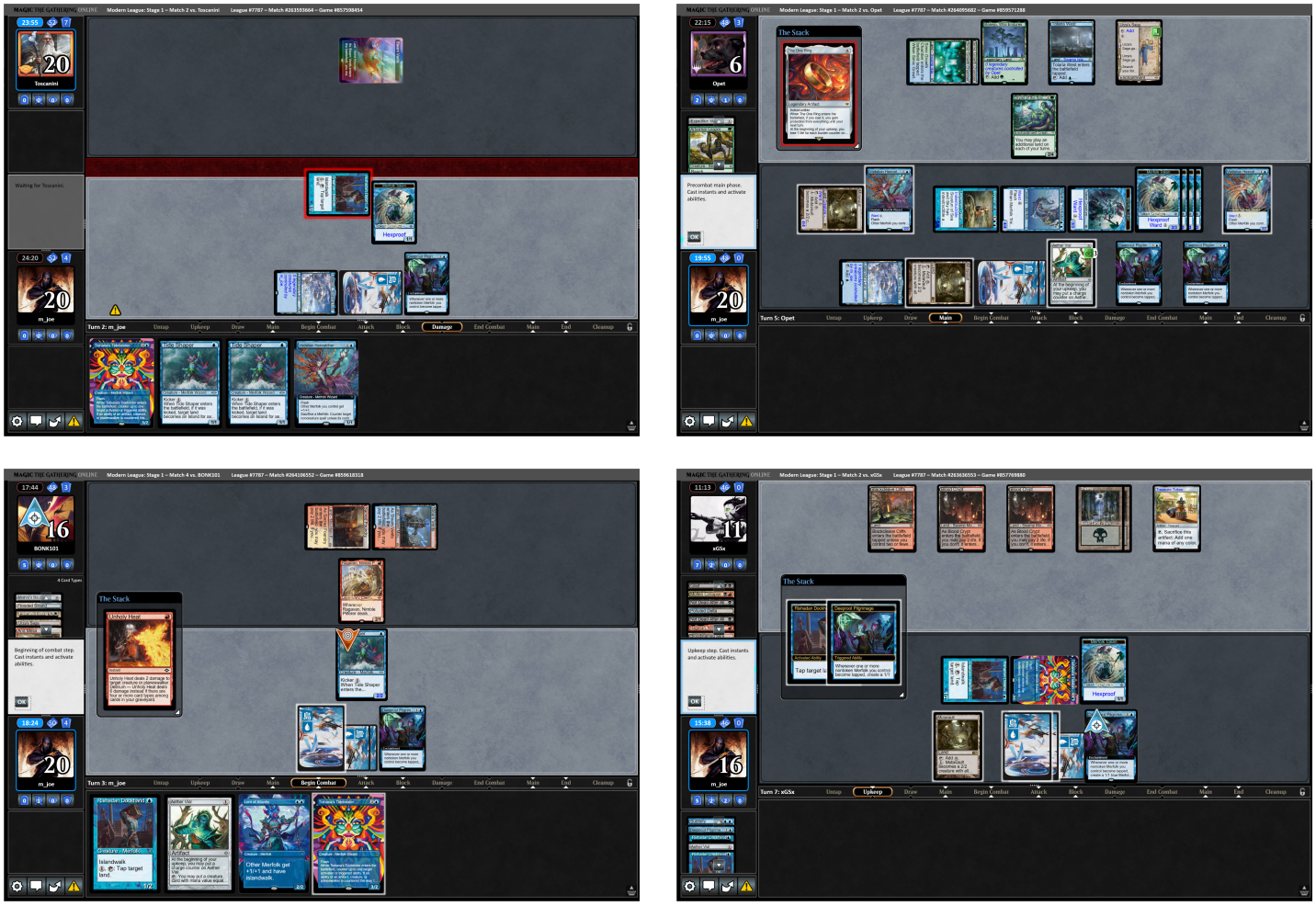
The card has been described by some as "anti-tempo," since, by itself, Pilgrimage has no immediate effect when it enters the battlefield. However, this is quite a shortsighted take. Despite not having a literal ETB ability, Pilgrimage most often makes at least one token the turn it is played, before an opponent has any opportunity to remove it. Very often, it makes significantly more than one token over the course of a game.

Tempo decks are fundamentally obsessed with efficiency, and Pilgrimage's mana-to-output ratio ranges from good to truly exceptional. After the small initial investment of 1U, we are rewarded over and over again simply for doing what the deck already wants to do. It's a card that gets better and better the longer it sticks around.

In this sense, Deeproot Pilgrimage can be directly compared to the tempo cornerstone of Modern Merfolk: Aether Vial. Aether Vial has no immediate effect when it enters the battlefield, but the tempo benefit snowballs from that moment forward. The same can be said of Pilgrimage: while it is on the battlefield, resources we commit to the board become stronger (Hexcatcher, Svyelun, Islandwalk lords) or more valuable for their token-generating abilities (Mutavault, Rishadan Dockhand). As with Aether Vial, Pilgrimage is a single card that allows us to use our resources far more effectively, and to grow our board more rapidly.

DEEPROOT PILGRIMAGE IN ACTION

Below are a few screenshots of Deeproot Pilgrimage making things difficult for our opponents.



Left-to-right, top-to-bottom: 1-drop into Pilgrimage, start making tokens!; Pilgrimage and Mutavault in multiples are very strong, and the tokens have great synergy with Hexcatcher; Pilgrimage obliges opponents to spend removal on lower-value creatures; With Dockhand, Mutavault, and another non-token Merfolk, Pilgrimage can make three tokens per turn cycle!

SYNERGIES

As mentioned above, Deeproot Pilgrimage increases the potency of most of the creatures in our deck, as follows:

- **Rishadan Dockhand**'s activated ability (1, T: Tap target land) has generally been viewed as poor because we want our Merfolk to be attacking, not tapping to do other stuff. But, in combination with Pilgrimage, Dockhand's ability taps a land *and makes a 1/1 Hexproof Merfolk token.* This elevates Dockhand from passable to extraordinary!

- Rather than *either* being a creature *or* making mana, Pilgrimage now invites **Mutavault** to do both things at once; if we activate Mutavault then tap it for mana, we get a 1/1 Hexproof Merfolk token!

- Outside of Dockhand's ability and Mutavault tapping for mana, the third way Mono-Blue Merfolk makes tokens with Pilgrimage is simply by **attacking.** So, with a Dockhand, a Mutavault, and one other non-token

Merfolk on board, we can generate three 1/1 Hexproof Merfolk tokens every single turn! With multiple Pilgrimages, things can get crazy pretty quickly.

- **Vodalian Hexcatcher** synergizes incredibly with Pilgrimage, as every token can also be sacrificed to Hexcatcher's ability to counter spells.

- **Svyelun** has beautiful synergy with Pilgrimage: once there are two Hexproof tokens on the battlefield, she effectively gains Indestructible permanently. And, remember, attacking with her makes a token! So our board just becomes harder and harder for the opponent to deal with, as we continue drawing an extra card and making more tokens each turn.

- Our **Islandwalk lords** love having tons of 1/1 Hexproof Merfolk tokens around to buff.

- The Flash ability on **Trickster** and **Tidebinder** becomes even more valuable, as casting surprise creatures on our opponent's end step is even more threatening, as they can attack and make tokens on our turn

TIPS AND TRICKS

Deeproot Pilgrimage can perform well in nearly any matchup, but it excels in some particular circumstances. See the tips below to get the most out of this powerful enchantment!

- **Pilgrimage is much stronger when on the play.** Consider boarding some (or all) copies out on the draw in very fast matchups.

- Pilgrimage says *"Whenever one **or more** nontoken Merfolk you control become tapped…"* Because of this, attacking with any number of non-token Merfolk only makes *one* token, as all your attacking creatures become tapped in a single instance. This applies equally to casting Convoke spells by tapping multiple Merfolk, and to tapping three Merfolk for Kumena's draw ability; only one token will be created.

- **Pilgrimage triggers stack**, so multiple copies of the enchantment are generally very strong, as long as you have some means of generating tokens (Mutavault, Dockhand, other non-token Merfolk).

- We can **"chain" Mutavault activations** by using one's mana to activate the next, making many tokens.

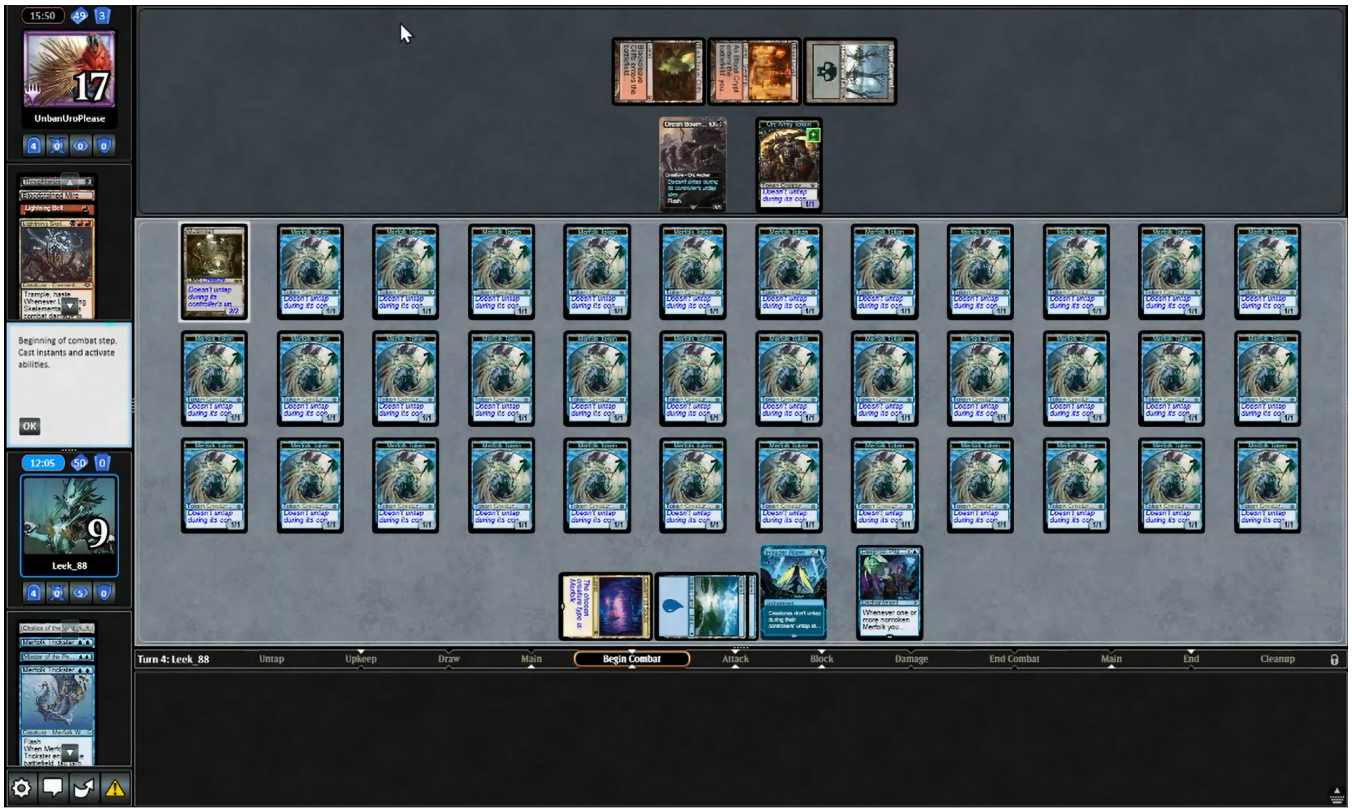
- It is generally wise to **wait to play Pilgrimage** until you have some means of generating at least one token the same turn you play the enchantment, to guarantee value. This often means waiting until turn three or later to cast it. However, if you're playing against a counterspell deck, it's best to play Pilgrimage whenever the opponent taps out to ensure this important spell resolves.

- It is usually best to **wait until our opponent's end step to activate Mutavault** to tap and make a token. This is the best way to play around sorcery speed removal. Additionally, by waiting as long as possible, you can potentially surprise an opponent by creating a token at instant speed (to sacrifice to Hexcatcher, or to give Svyelun Indestructible, for example).

- When we have amassed numerous tokens, **it is often best to attack with all of them,** even if a couple get eaten by larger creatures in combat. As long as we can keep generating tokens each turn, we can keep crashing in and dealing damage.

- A neat Pilgrimage trick is to **use Dockhand to tap a summoning-sick Mutavault** to make two tokens!

- Pilgrimage can go infinite in combination with **Intruder Alarm** and Mutavault (or Smuggler's Copter or Mothdust Changeling). When we activate Mutavault and tap it for mana, Pilgrimage will trigger and create a token, which triggers Intruder Alarm to untap our Mutavault. We can repeat this loop as many times as we want, to create as many tokens as we want (see the fun screenshot below!).



CHAPTER 12: *Lands Strategy*

LANDS IN OPENING HANDS

Before getting into great detail with individual lands, it's important to discuss general strategy with respect to what kind of lands Modern Merfolk wants to see in its opening hands.

- **Our ideal opening hand contains only two blue lands and an Aether Vial.** This will allow us to deploy two Merfolk per turn as early as turn two. Instead of two blue lands and Vial, we can gladly keep one blue land, a Mutavault, and Vial. These lands will still allow us to cast Deeproot Pilgrimage or Hexcatcher on turn two, and Mutavault can help cast Svyelun on turn three if we draw a second blue source.
- **A hand with only one blue land and Aether Vial is still keepable on the play or draw**, because even a Mutavault off the top will allow us to start casting 2-drops (though a second blue source is typically preferable). Being on the draw is generally better with these hands, so we have an extra chance to draw a second land before our main phase on turn two.
- **A hand with only Mutavault and Aether Vial is a mulligan.** There are just too many ways for the hand to develop in unfavorable ways. However, in extremely difficult matchups, we might be incentivized to keep a high-variance hand like this if the hand has relevant interaction/sideboard cards, and all we need is to rip a single blue source for the hand to be excellent. It is more reasonable to keep this kind of hand in a very difficult matchup because our odds of hitting a blue source (16/53, or 30%) are better than our typical odds of winning, and likely better than mulliganing to a more effective hand of six cards.
- **As for hands without Aether Vial, our ideal draw is two blue sources and a Mutavault.** This allows us to cast spells in the early game, and have a great chance of drawing a fourth land by turn four in order to cast two 2-drops per turn as soon as possible. Mutavault is also just a great card to have access to in many matchups, provided we have sufficient blue sources, as well.
- **Three blue sources is still great, though a single blue source and two Mutavaults gets dangerous.** Whether we can keep a hand like this will depend on the other cards and how blue-intensive their casting costs are.
- **Openers with four lands and three spells are also situationally keepable.** Mutavaults are particularly helpful in hands like these.
- **Any opening seven-card hand with more than four lands should be mulliganed.**

LANDS SEQUENCING

Additionally, there are a few aspects of correct lands sequencing in Modern Merfolk that will not be immediately intuitive to newer players:

- **We should virtually always lead on a blue source.** Playing a Mutavault on turn one is pointless if we're just going to play a blue source on turn two to cast a spell anyway. And attacking with Mutavault is the worst thing we can do on turn two; it does nothing to further our board, and risks getting killed and setting us way back on our development.

- **We should typically play a second blue source on turn two when possible.** As mentioned, attacking with Mutavault on turn two is terrible; we *must* cast a spell with our mana on turn two. In general, the only reason to play a Mutavault on turn two is if we have Deeproot Pilgrimage on turn two and want to make a token with Mutavault on turn three, or potentially to attack with Mutavault on turn three (still often not the best option).
- **Wait as long as possible before playing Waterlogged Grove or Fiery Islet.** This is only logical, as it saves valuable points on our life total.
- **If a blue opponent is tapped out, we should generally wait to play Cavern of Souls if possible.** This is because the opponent may choose to hold up countermagic at some point. Then, in the face of open mana, we can slam Cavern and ruin their plans.
- **Hold Otawara in hand unless you need the mana immediately.** Being able to use its Channel ability later can be extremely useful.

SIDEBOARDING OUT LANDS

Finally, one general point that is very much worth mentioning and understanding is the idea of **sideboarding out a land while on the draw.** The idea is that, while on the draw, we get an entire extra card while making our land drops, and this changes the math significantly on how many lands we want to run. Here is a quote from Frank Karsten, Magic's foremost mathematician (from a wonderful article **here**):

> ***"Can you cut a land on the draw? For sure.*** *Suppose that in a 60-card deck, you'd want to hit your 3rd land drop with 90% certainty and your 4th land drop with 75% certainty. On the play, you need 26 lands to achieve this. On the draw, you only need 23 lands.* ***The extra draw step makes a big difference!"***

Sideboarding out a land is a big deal, because it means we get to have an **extra spell** in the deck! It is an advanced technique, and seems strange to newer players. But Magic is, in large part, a game of math, and the more we understand and trust the math, the better we will do.

MUTAVAULT TIPS AND TRICKS

- Hold Mutavault up to help make Svyelun Indestructible.
- Hold Mutavault up to sacrifice to Hexcatcher.
- As a general rule, casting spells with Mutavault is better than attacking with it. However, always assess your clock to know if it is time to begin going all-in with attacks.
- Mutavault can be activated then tapped for mana to make a token with Deeproot Pilgrimage.
- Mutavault can make mana the turn it enters the battlefield. However, if you activate it when it has summoning sickness, it will not be able to tap, and will no longer be able to add mana.
- If you activate a summoning-sick Mutavault to block on the opponent's turn, that Mutavault will not be able to also tap for mana, as explained above.

- These previous points are most relevant on MTGO, where it is not only possible but very easy to accidentally activate the wrong Mutavault. To avoid this, always right click Mutavault first before activating. The one that is summoning sick will say "Newly controlled" (in tiny blue letters). This Mutavault should be tapped for mana to activate another Mutavault without summoning sickness.

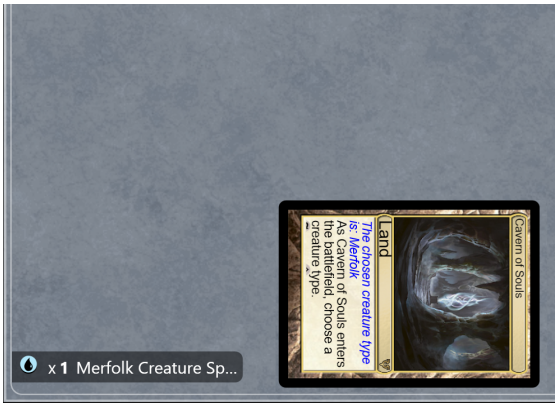
Mutavault
Land
Magic 2014
Newly controlled
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.
Mutavault
Land
: Add .
: Mutavault becomes a 2/2 creature with all creature types until end of turn. It's still a land.

Right: *Use care when activating Mutavault on MTGO; the words "Newly controlled" appear In blue.*

CAVERN OF SOULS TIPS AND TRICKS

- Cavern of Souls can name a creature type other than Merfolk if it is essential for us to resolve a non-Merfolk creature spell such as Subtlety (Elemental Incarnation) or Phantasmal Image (Illusion).

- On MTGO, when you create colored mana using Cavern, it puts that mana in its own little box (see right). Make sure to click on this mana when you cast your Merfolk spell; if you accidentally do not, and this mana remains floating, you will not be able to use it for non-Merfolk spells, and you will not be able to untap the Cavern.


x 1 Merfolk Creature Sp...
Land
The chosen creature type is Merfolk
As Cavern of Souls enters the battlefield, choose a creature type.
Cavern of Souls

Right: *Use care when paying costs using Cavern on MTGO; click the box as shown here.*

- While playing in paper, it is *not* required for players to specify when they are using colored mana from Cavern of Souls to make their spell uncounterable. Since having our spells be uncounterable is always to our benefit, it is assumed that, anytime we use Cavern of Souls to cast a creature of the named type, we are doing so with colored mana and that the spell will be uncounterable. It is up to our opponent to pay attention to when we use Cavern of Souls, in order to not waste their counterspells.

OTAWARA TIPS AND TRICKS

- As mentioned previously, we should try to **keep Otawara in hand** unless we absolutely need the mana, as it can be immensely useful as a bounce effect later in the game.

- Remember that **Otawara can save our own creatures**. This is particularly strong if we have Aether Vial to immediately redeploy the bounced creature.

- Otawara's effect does *not* specify "non-land," as virtually all flexible bounce spells do. The effect is *inclusive* rather than *exclusive*, which is to say it specifies what it *can* bounce rather than what it *can't*. Its text specifies "target artifact, creature, enchantment, or planeswalker." As such, it is **able to bounce some lands**, such as Urza's Saga (an enchantment), any artifact land, or any activated manland.

- Otawara's most essential function is, perhaps, bouncing a resolved **Ensnaring Bridge** (see screenshot below), against which Merfolk has traditionally had precious few answers. The fact that part of our manabase can perform this critical task now is outstanding, and makes Otawara worth running two copies, in the opinion of most Modern Merfolk players.

MINAMO TIPS AND TRICKS

- Minamo is in the deck for one reason: to **untap Svyelun**. We always want to attack with Svyelun to draw cards and push damage, but we also enjoy having her as a big Indestructible blocker. Minamo allows us to give Svyelun pseudo-vigilance and achieve both these things.

- Though virtually always used to untap Svyelun after attacking, Minamo's ability can also untap her **anytime an opponent taps her**. One way this would occur regularly in the past was with opponents tapping our entire team with Cryptic Command. A more popular card today that frequently taps our creatures is the "Ice" half of Fire // Ice. In the screenshot below, a Creativity opponent tapped Svyelun with Ice at the beginning of combat step in an attempt to prevent her from attacking. However, Minamo easily untapped her and she was able to attack normally. The Merfolk player won the game soon after.

OBORO TIPS AND TRICKS

- Oboro is not widely played in Modern Merfolk today. We want a mix of basic Islands (to avoid losing to Blood Moon) and utility lands, and we have so many great choices for utility lands that Oboro simply doesn't make the cut. However, it does have some tricky applications that are worth understanding.

- The primary interaction is between **Oboro and Mutavault**. If we have these two lands on the battlefield on turn three and no further blue lands to play, we can float blue mana with Oboro then use Mutavault's grey mana to bounce Oboro back to our hand using Oboro's ability. Oboro can then be replayed as our land drop for the turn, netting **two blue mana**. (To do this effectively on MTGO, it has to be done in a very precise sequence. First float blue mana from Oboro *and* grey mana from Mutavault. Next, click on Oboro. You will be asked to pay for its ability, at which point you can select the grey mana to use from the menu. If you simply tap Oboro to float blue and then click on the land, it will *immediately* use that blue mana to pay for Oboro's ability, and the land will be bounced to your hand.)

- Beyond this Mutavault trick, Oboro's utility lies in bouncing it back to hand in **situations where we have to choose a card to discard**. Two examples of this are Kolaghan's Command and Liliana of the Veil's +1 ability. If we want to keep the cards currently in our hand, we can bounce Oboro with either of these effects on the stack, and discard the land instead.

- Oboro can also be **useful against 8-Rack**. In response to The Rack's triggers on our upkeep, we can bounce Oboro to hand to reduce the amount of damage we take from the trigger.

CHAPTER 13: *Sideboarding Strategy*

GETTING STARTED WITH SIDEBOARDING

As mentioned earlier in this primer, the Modern Merfolk main deck flex slots and sideboard card choices are completely up for grabs (though some choices are more popular/stronger than others). For the purpose of being able to create a generalized sideboarding guide, I will use a generic Merfolk list (shown below), creating a sort of average deck from among numerous successful examples. The intent is to give newer players a strong understanding of the types of spells that come in and out for various types of matchups. Each of the matchups below has sideboarding advice specific to this decklist, as well as strategic suggestions for the matchup. And, because no single decklist can contain every possible card option, each matchup will include (in parentheses) a short list of "Essential Cards," including cards not in this specific list.

Because **Deeproot Pilgrimage** is still very new, and introduces a very different pattern of play, it is still unclear precisely when it should be moved to the sideboard. The advice below is an educated guess.

I consider this deck's **20 lands** to be slightly too few on the play, and slightly too many on the draw. In a perfect world, I would play 20.5 lands on the play and 19.5 lands on the draw. Because of this, I choose to not board out a land while on the draw. In theory, 20 lands gives us a slightly higher chance of not drawing enough lands while on the play, and a slightly higher chance of drawing too many lands while on the draw.

Generic Modern Merfolk (Full-Power/Non-Budget)
December 2023

CREATURES (30)
4 Rishadan Dockhand
4 Tide Shaper
2 Lord of Atlantis
4 Master of the Pearl Trident
4 Vodalian Hexcatcher
4 Merfolk Trickster
4 Svyelun of Sea and Sky
4 Tishana's Tidebinder

NON-CREATURE SPELLS (10)
4 Aether Vial
3 Deeproot Pilgrimage
3 Dismember

LANDS (20)
9 Island
4 Mutavault
4 Cavern of Souls
2 Otawara, Soaring City
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge

SIDEBOARD (15)
4 Force of Negation
3 Subtlety
3 Harbinger of the Tides
3 Chalice of the Void
2 Spreading Seas

Rhinos (click on the deck name to see a sample decklist for each archetype)

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +3 Chalice +3 Harbinger // -3 Dism -3 Pilgrimage -2 Svy -2 Shaper
- **Essential Cards:** Chalice, Force, Tidebinder, Hex, Harb (Truth, Bomb/EE, counters)
- **Matchup Advice:** The large majority of Rhinos decks are Temur, while a few will splash white for Leyline Binding, Ardent Plea, Teferi, and occasionally other cards. Our sideboard plan is the same for both.

  In general, don't worry about their spot removal. Counter Rhinos, instead. Always be aware of the possibility of Cascade, and play accordingly. Resolving a Chalice (X=0) and protecting it (from Leyline Binding, Teferi, Brazen Borrower, Tishana's Tidebinder and Force of Vigor) is a recipe for success (Rhinos can't resolve through X=0). Ratchet Bomb and Engineered Explosives are excellent for sweeping away any Rhinos that make it to the battlefield (but be aware that it will also destroy your Chalice!). Remember that Tidebinder can stifle Cascade. With a bit of well-timed interaction, we can often race in this matchup. We rarely want to block, so get attacks in where you can.

Yawgmoth

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Sub +3 Harb +2 Seas // -4 Hex -4 Svy
- **Essential Cards:** Tidebinder, Dism, Sub, Seas (Totem, Cage, Needle, grave hate)
- **Matchup Advice:** Yawgmoth used to be a nearly-unwinnable matchup, but the addition of Tidebinder has made it much more interesting. The best approach seems to be hitting their mana hard in the first few turns: Dismember and tap mana dorks with Trickster, and hit their lands with Seas, Tide Shapers, and Dockhand (Seas effects also let us punch through with Islandwalk). The hope in hitting their mana is to prevent them from being able to cast Yawgmoth. Subtlety can also delay Yawgmoth. Tidebinder can hit many high-value targets (Yawg, Grist, Cauldron, Undying creatures, Hapatra, Blood Artist/Cutthroat…), but the choice depends completely on the board state.

  Hexcatcher is an easy cut postboard; it's a 1/1 that gets blown out by Orcish Bowmasters. Additionally, Yawgmoth decks run very few non-creature spells that Hexcatcher's ability can even target.

  Cursed Totem is a very good card in this matchup, but I find it too weak in other matchups to want to include it in my sideboard. This is a personal decision; Totems are a very defensible choice.

Mono-Green Tron

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +3 Sub +2 Seas // -3 Dismember -3 Svy -3 Pilgrimage
- **Essential Cards:** Tidebinder, Force, Sub, Shaper, Seas, Hexcatcher (Sphere, Needle, counters)
- **Matchup Advice:** Tron is a very solid matchup for Merfolk. We have Seas effects to disrupt their Tron lands; Force, Subtlety, Tidebinder, and Hexcatcher to stop their important spells; and a fast clock that they have trouble interacting with. This is not a complicated matchup; turn their lands into Islands, counter a spell or two, and attack with Merfolk.

Blue/Red Murktide

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Chal +3 Harb // -3 Tidebinder -2 Dockhand -1 Pilgrimage
- **Essential Cards:** Chalice, Trickster, Harb Islandwalk lords, Dism, Otawara (Kira, grave hate)
- **Matchup Advice:** Chalice is fantastic in this matchup. Our general approach is to use Trickster to slow down their attacks, build a board, and eventually play lords and mount an unblockable attack. Dismembering their turn one creature is excellent (DRC is a more important target than Ragavan, but both are good targets).

  Tidebinder is relatively poor in the matchup. It can stifle a DRC or Ledger Shredder, but it costs three mana and the opponent can always just kill the Tidebinder with all their removal. Pilgrimage can also be poor if the opponent kills all our Merfolk, making it impossible to generate tokens. Harbinger is important for bouncing Murktides (Otawara can also perform this function).

Amulet Titan

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +3 Subtlety +2 Seas // -4 Svy -3 Pilgrimage -1 Dism -1 LoA
- **Essential Cards:** Subtlety, Tidebinder, Force, Tide Shaper, Seas, Dismember (Ashiok, Sphere)
- **Matchup Advice:** Subtlety is the all-star of this matchup. Amulet players will tap out as soon as possible to play Primeval Titan, and Subtlety is basically Time Walk in that spot. Once we have four mana and can actually cast Subtlety for its full cost (rather than its Evoke cost), we will virtually never lose. Tidebinder was a hugely helpful addition in the matchup; stifling a Titan's ETB ability turns it into a vanilla 6/6, which is generally very easy for us to deal with.

  Force of Negation is for Amulet and Summoner's Pact. Shaper and Seas are primarily for destroying Urza's Sagas (which can grab Amulets), but also occasionally for Valakut. We can also take the off green mana with Seas to make them unable to pay for Summoner's Pact during their upkeep, winning us the game on the spot. Dismember is for Dryad of the Ilysian Grove (without which they have a much harder time winning).

Hammertime

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Force +3 Harb +2 Seas // -4 Svy -4 Dockhand
- **Essential Cards:** Tidebinder, Trickster, Harb, Shaper, Seas, Dism (Recall, Needle)
- **Matchup Advice:** As in most matchups, interaction is how we survive. The main target for Force is Sigarda's Aid, but there are other good situational targets, as well. Hit their Urza's Sagas with Tide Shapers and Spreading Seas to destroy them. Dismember creatures in response to equipment targeting (though, if the opponent is tapped out and only controls a single creature, Dismember it on our turn to avoid Blacksmith's Skill). Use Trickster and Harbinger to slow them down. There are many possible Tidebinder targets - choose carefully!

  Pilgrimage can be very good in the matchup if we can keep them off of Shadowspear (for example, by hitting a Shadowspear activation with Tidebinder).

Living End

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +3 Chalice +2 Sub // -3 Svy -3 Dism -3 Pilgrimage
- **Essential Cards:** Force, Chalice, Hexcatcher, Tidebinder (counters, grave hate)
- **Matchup Advice:** Living End is one of Merfolk's best matchups. It has always been pretty solid, but the additions of Hexcatcher and Tidebinder have helped it tremendously. A very cool interaction (discussed in Chapter 7) is being able to sacrifice all our creatures to Hexcatcher's ability (targeting Violent Outburst) so they return when Living End resolves. Chalice of the Void and Force of Negation are also top-notch interaction in the matchup. If we can draw a couple of these cards in the first few turns, we are very favored to win the game.

  I like bringing in two copies of Subtlety; Grief taking away our interaction is one of the few ways we can lose to Living End, and Subtlety can protect against it.

  Dockhand can be very useful to tap mana in the upkeep of their turn 3, when they would normally have access to three mana to cast a Cascade spell.

Hardened Scales

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Force +3 Harb +2 Seas // -3 Svy -3 Pilgrimage -2 Dockhand
- **Essential Cards:** Tidebinder, Tide Shaper, Seas, Trickster, Harb, Dism, Force (Recall, Totem, Needle)
- **Matchup Advice:** This is a very difficult matchup. Their mana values are sufficiently diverse that bringing in Chalice is not a winning strategy. We have to hope that they lean into the Urza's Saga plan, and that we happen to draw lots of Seas effects, to stand much of a chance. Use Trickster, Harbinger, Tidebinder, and Dismember to slow them down as much as possible. Use Force to counter Hardened Scales.

Burn

- **PLAY:** +4 Force +3 Harb +2 Seas // -4 Tidebinder -3 Dism -2 Dockhand
  DRAW: +4 Force +3 Harb // -4 Tidebinder -3 Dism
- **Essential Cards:** Force, Hexcatcher, Trickster (counters)
- **Matchup Advice:** Hexcatcher is excellent against Burn, as is Force of Negation. Trickster can slow down their attacks and make it easy for us to stabilize. Aether Vial is excellent, as it plays smoothly around Eidolon of the Great Revel (though Eidolon sees far less play these days… also, look out for Smash to Smithereens in games two and three). Chalice of the Void is not great here; Burn's mana values are very evenly distributed between 1-drops and 2-drops (and even some 3-drops), and Chalice is another potential target for Smash to Smithereens.

  Tidebinder is not great against Burn. The casting cost is high, and there are not many abilities to stifle.

Domain Zoo

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Harb +2 Force +2 Seas // -4 Dockhand -2 Tidebinder -1 Dism
- **Essential Cards:** Trickster, Harb, Dism (Tidebinder Mage)
- **Matchup Advice:** Our trump card in this matchup is Merfolk Trickster. Its ability kills Territorial Kavu instantly, and makes Wild Nacatl and Nishoba Brawler (and Tarmogoyf, if they play it) tiny and easy to eat in combat. Tribal Flames is a sorcery, and Domain Zoo plays a lot of non-creature spells, so a couple Force of Negations can do a good job. Since they play a lot of burn spells, it's wise to cut back on Dismembers somewhat. Turning one or more of their lands into Islands can sometimes hinder their Domain game plan.

Creativity

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +2 Seas // -4 Trickster -2 Svy
- **Essential Cards:** Force, Dockhand, Hexcatcher, Dismember, Otawara (counters, Bomb/Explosives)
- **Matchup Advice:** This is a *very* tricky matchup. If not played with intelligence and care you will lose every time. We do have the tools to win about half the time, but it is rarely easy. Force of Negation is far and away our best spell. Counter Wrenn and Six, Fable of the Mirror-Breaker, or Creativity/Transmogrify without a second thought; these are all critical spells. We should virtually never waste counterspells on spot removal like Lightning Bolt or Leyline Binding (unless we have lethal on board); we have tons of Merfolk in the deck, but not tons of counterspells. Ratchet Bomb is another very impactful card for us, blowing up any tokens the opponent has accumulated. Dismember or Otawara can destroy a token in response to Creativity targeting it, effectively countering the spell (unless the Creativity is targeting more than one token, in which case we are out of luck). If Wrenn and Six resolves, be very careful with any X/1s you deploy so they don't get picked off by Wrenn's minus ability.

  Messing with their mana (Shaper, Seas, Dockhand) can slow them down. Tidebinder is versatile in the matchup, hitting a variety of potential targets - choose carefully! Pilgrimage has its place in the matchup, and is at its absolute best while making many tokens to sacrifice to Hexcatcher.

  As with 4c Omnath decks, Creativity decks vary widely in their composition. If you see blue, be sure to play around Spell Pierce when possible, and look out for Teferi.

Mono-Black Coffers

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +3 Subtlety +2 Seas // -4 Trickster -2 Shaper -2 Vial -1 Dism
- **Essential Cards:** Pilgrimage, Force, Sub, Seas, Svy (counters, Kira, Needle)
- **Matchup Advice:** This is a very difficult, grindy matchup. The Coffers deck is full of spot removal, board wipes, and value engines. Pilgrimage is probably our single best card here, consistently generating hexproof tokens that are hard for the opponent to interact with. Force a key spell (Karn, Ring, Damnation), generate value with Pilgrimage, turn their Coffers into an Island, and you should have a pretty good chance of winning.

Scam

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Subtlety +3 Harb +2 Seas // -4 Hex -2 Shaper -2 Vial
- **Essential Cards:** Svyelun, Pilgrimage, Dismember, Subtlety (Kira, grave hate)
- **Matchup Advice:** Scam has some incredibly scary and frustrating openings, but, in general, the matchup is not too unfavorable. If they get us with Undying Evil and Grief on turn one, we will have to rely on the top of our deck for most of the game. However, we do have reasonable tools to fight back. Svyelun is fantastic in the matchup, as her card draw can replenish our hand and help us pull ahead. Pilgrimage is one of our best cards here, particularly in combination with Svy (a couple of hexproof tokens make her virtually impossible to deal with).

  As seen in the screenshot and discussion in Chapter 8, Merfolk Trickster is great in the matchup because it can remove undying after it has been granted, and potentially trade with a Dauthi Voidwalker. This will keep their creature in the graveyard after it dies. Harbinger is particularly solid as a top-deck against Grief; it bounces their attacker, develops our board, and forces them to spend four mana to recast their Elemental for no extra value (since we have no cards in hand to discard). Dismember is excellent, particularly against Voidwalker.

Omnath Control

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Subtlety // -3 Trickster
- **Essential Cards:** Hex, Pilgrimage, Tidebinder, Mutavault (Needle)
- **Matchup Advice:** "Omnath Control" is a bit of a catch-all name for a variety of decks that play Omnath, Solitude, Leyline Binding, and planeswalkers. Most lists don't play Supreme Verdict, and, if they do, there are not many copies. As such, we should aim to get as many bodies on the board as quickly as possible, and do our best impersonation of an aggro deck. Use Tidebinder to stop a Binding or Omnath trigger, or a Ring activation, and attack attack attack. Keep in mind that the longer the game goes on, the less likely we are to win.

Death's Shadow

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Chal +3 Harb // -3 Tidebinder -3 Shaper
- **Essential Cards:** Chalice, Trickster, Harb, Dism, Svy, Islandwalk Lords, Otawara (Kira, grave hate)
- **Matchup Advice:** Grixis Shadow is a very fun, generally even matchup for Merfolk. With 20+ 1-drops, Chalice of the Void can be excellent here. In this respect and others, the Shadow matchup plays very similarly to UR Murktide.

  Since the opponent damages themself in order to play Death's Shadow, we often don't need too much of a board to make a well-timed Islandwalk lord lethal with a single swing, so these creatures are essential in the matchup. Svyelun lets us maintain card advantage against all their spot removal and hand disruption. Pilgrimage can be solid in the matchup, as lists generally play few fliers, and hexproof tokens can clog up ground combat.

  Many Shadow lists these days actually play Murktide Regent. Harbinger and Otawara are excellent against this big flying threat.

Mill

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +3 Chalice // -0 Cards (net +7 cards)
- **Essential Cards:** Force, Chalice, Dismember, Merfolk (Gaea's Blessing/Eldrazi Titans, counters)
- **Matchup Advice:** Mill is a great matchup for Merfolk. We bring in a lot of useful cards and cut nothing, netting us extra cards, making it harder for our opponent to mill us out. Do *not* cut a land on the draw in this matchup; since we're adding spells, our land count is already being diluted somewhat. As Mill doesn't attack our life total, we want to draw all our Dismembers to kill any crabs they play. Beware of the possibility of Ensnaring Bridge (basically, don't play Otawara as a land unless absolutely necessary). Crypt Incursion can be a beating. Chalice of the Void is excellent, stopping crabs, Surgical Extraction, Fatal Push, and Visions of Beyond.

Grixis Control

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Subtlety +2 Chalice // -3 Dism -2 Trickster
- **Essential Cards:** Pilgrimage, Tidebinder, Svy, Merfolk, Cavern, Vial (countermagic, Needle)
- **Matchup Advice:** This is a favorable matchup. We play through their counterspells with Cavern and Vial. Lacking exile-based removal, it can be impossible for the opponent to deal with Pilgrimage and/or Svyelun. They don't run a lot of creatures, so Dismember and Trickster are not at their best. I bring Subtlety in because the games go long, and Subtlety is simply a flash 3/3 flier (that can occasionally get value with its ETB ability). I don't bring in Force because card advantage is important, and we don't want to get into a counterspell battle with them.

  I bring Chalice in here because this specific list (click "Grixis Control" in the blue banner above) is running Ragavan. Grixis Control generally plays a lot of 1mv non-creature spells, but not quite enough to make Chalice a slam dunk. But if you add a playset (or more) of 1mv creatures, Chalice is suddenly relevant against 15+ cards and is definitely worth bringing in.

UWx Control

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Sub +2 Seas +2 Force // -4 Trickster -3 Dismember
- **Essential Cards:** Svyelun, Pilgrimage, Hex, Merfolk, Vial, Cavern, Muta (Kira)
- **Matchup Advice:** UW can be tricky because of all their exile-based removal and occasional board wipes. But we are pretty well-situated out of the gate with Cavern of Souls playing neatly around their counterspells (Vial helps here, as well). As with all grindy matchups, Pilgrimage is an all-star here (if it can stick around). We want to aim to maintain a board of 1-2 creatures (3 creatures runs the risk of being completely blown out by a Supreme Verdict). Keep the possibility of Solitude in mind at all times when calculating your attacks. Spreading Seas can take them off Castle Vantress and/or Hall of Storm Giants, while drawing us a card. This makes it an easy card to include post-board.

Infect

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +4 Force +3 Chalice +3 Harb +2 Seas // -4 Svy -3 Pilgrimage -3 Tidebinder -2 LoA
- **Essential Cards:** Force, Chalice, Trickster, Harb, Dism (counters)
- **Matchup Advice:** We have a solid matchup against Infect, with all our interaction. Chalice is sensational here. In general, we never want to be the one to "blink first;" let the opponent cast their pump spell before responding with our interaction. Be prepared to take one or two poison (even with Dismember and/or other interaction in hand) if the opponent has mana up, to avoid being blown out by Vines of Vastwood, Royal Treatment, or other similar effects.

  Tidebinder is decent against Venerated Rotpriest and Spellskite, but rather slow in the matchup.

Merfolk (Mirror)

- **PLAY/DRAW:** +3 Harb +3 Sub // -3 Svy -3 Pilgrimage
- **Essential Cards:** Vial, Dismember, Trickster, Harb, Master of the Pearl Trident, Subtlety (bounce spells)
- **Matchup Advice:** Our mirror match is more than a little absurd, and very dependent upon luck. Winning the die roll is a huge advantage. Playing Aether Vial on turn one is a huge advantage. Drawing Master of the Pearl Trident instead of Lord of Atlantis (which gives our *opponent's* Merfolk +1/+1 and Islandwalk, as well) is a huge advantage. Drawing interactive cards like Tricksters and Harbingers and Dismembers is a huge advantage. If you draw mostly these cards, you will likely win. If you don't, you will likely lose. Playing non-basics before Islands whenever possible gains a non-trivial advantage, though we are not often looking to block in this matchup.

Click **here** to access the spreadsheet file (which you can copy and modify how you see fit) shown below:

QTY	MAINDECK	RHINO	YAWG	TRON	MURK	TITAN	HAMMER	LIV END	SCALES	BURN	ZOO	CREAT	COFFER	OMNTH	SHADW	MILL	GRX CTR	UW CTR	SCAM	INFECT	MERFK
4	Dockhand				-2		-4		-2	-2 (PLAY)	-4										
4	Tide Shaper	-2											-2		-3				-2		
2	Lord of Atlantis					-1														-2	
4	Master of PT																				
4	Trickster											-4	-4	-3			-2	-4			
4	Hexcatcher		-4																-4		
4	Svyelun	-2	-4	-3		-4	-4	-3	-3			-2								-4	-3
4	Tidebinder				-3					-4	-2				-3					-3	
4	Aether Vial												-2						-2		
3	Pilgrimage	-3		-3	-1	-3		-3	-3											-3	-3
3	Dismember	-3		-3		-1		-3		-3	-1		-1				-3	-3			
QTY	SIDEBOARD																				
4	Force of Neg	4		4		4	3	4	3	4	2	4	4			4		2		4	
3	Subtlety		3	3		3		2					3	3			3	3	3		3
3	Harbinger	3	3		3		3		3	3	3				3				3	3	3
3	Chalice	3			3			3							3	3	2			3	
2	Seas		2	2		2	2		2	2 (PLAY)	2	2	2					2	2	2	

CHAPTER 14: *Miscellaneous Tips and Tricks*

GENERAL ADVICE

There has been a lot of very specific advice in this primer up to this point. This section will cover a few general ideas that were not relevant in previous chapters.

- If you know you are going to **draw a card**, whether with Svyelun, Spreading Seas, or some other effect, it is typically correct to **wait to make your land drop** until after you have drawn the extra card. Many times, if you make your land drop too soon, you will find yourself drawing a better land later in the turn, and regretting having been so hasty.
- In the blind, we often want to **run out Tide Shaper on turn one** as an attacker. Many decks in Modern play Islands, so the Tide Shaper will often be a 2/2, which is excellent for us.
- Beware playing out Tide Shaper (kicked or not) into two open mana including black; even if Shaper is kicked, it is still a 1/1 until its ability resolves, and is vulnerable to **Orcish Bowmasters.** This also applies to Vodalian Hexcatcher, and any other 1-toughness creatures you might play.
- **Rishadan Dockhand** can be very useful against combo decks that need a specific amount of mana to cast a critical spell, such as Creativity, Living End, or even Amulet Titan.
- Against Yawgmoth, you can bounce **Agatha's Soul Cauldron** back to their hand (with Otawara, usually) with its activation on the stack targeting a creature in the graveyard. The creature will still be exiled, and one of their creatures will still get a +1/+1 counter, but their creatures will not gain the activated abilities of the exiled card. This can be extremely helpful if they're exiling something like Yawgmoth or Grist!

CHAPTER 15: *Other Mono-Blue Merfolk Variations*

SEA AND SKY (HISTORY)

On June 19th, 2022, David Bishop (known as "**Bishark**" on MTGO and Discord), a well-known Modern Merfolk player, made waves after winning first place in a 177-player **Modern tournament** at Face to Face Games in Vancouver. However, he wasn't playing Merfolk! Instead, he won with a previously-unknown blue deck featuring many manlands, 3-drop and 4-drop creatures, counterspells, and other controlling spells. The only Merfolk in the deck were a playset of Svyelun in the main and a playset of Tide Shapers in the sideboard (supporting the playset of Spreading Seas in the main deck). **But where did this mysterious blue deck come from?**

Bishark had been impressed by the results of a Merfolk pilot on Discord named **Zeigl**, who had put up back-to-back MTGO trophies (including one without a single game loss, as seen in the screenshot below at left) a few days earlier with the deck, on June 16th. Bishark loved the look of the deck, and chose it for his Face to Face event.

But the back story goes one step deeper. If we look at the top-left corner of Zeigl's deck screenshot (below right), we see it was titled "**MonoU Mhayashi**." As it turned out, the deck was actually created by none other than MHayashi, one of the most innovative and successful Modern Merfolk pilots. A couple weeks earlier, on June 1st, MHayashi had posted a video entitled "**It's Alive! I Combined the Blue Control and Merfolk Decks!**" in which he came very close to going undefeated in an MTGO Modern league.

One of Zeigl's 5-0s was **published**, Bishark's tournament win made the rounds on **Twitter**, and the deck was suddenly having a viral moment! On June 22nd, **Andrea Mengucci** streamed a league with the deck, going 4-1. In a wild twist, the only loss was to *another* deck designed by MHayashi (Mono-Red Obosh)!

At this point, the Modern Merfolk channel on Discord was discussing this new deck as much as or more than Merfolk. There was a vote on what the deck's name should be. A majority liked the name "**Sea and Sky**," after Svyelun and the deck's balance of Merfolk and flying creatures. Another significant portion preferred the very

clever name "**Merfolk Surprise**," after a **skit by the YouTube channel LoadingReadyRun** in which a player keeps trimming Merfolk from their deck until it's basically just a blue control deck.

SEA AND SKY (HOW THE DECK WORKS)

For a bit on how the deck actually functions, we have **Zeigl**, himself, here to explain (updated for 2024!):

Want a **highly interactive, tempo-oriented** deck that can out-grind anyone? Then **Sea and Sky** is for you!

While Sea and Sky doesn't run a lot of Merfolk, its tricky and tempo-based playstyle very much mimics Modern Merfolk. The deck is hard to categorize, since it can play many roles between Tempo, Midrange and even Control. I would call it a **mono-blue Tempo/Midrange hybrid**. In the past, we used cards like Vendilion Clique, Ancestral Vision, and Faerie Conclave, which have now been outclassed by newer and more resilient/impactful additions.

Since our threats are a bit clunky, we try to prevent everything our opponent does in the early game by:

- **Gaining mana and/or tempo advantage** with Petty Theft and Dismember, and by using Force of Negation and Subtlety aggressively
- **Disrupting** with Chalice of the Void, Tishana's Tidebinder, Spreading Seas, and Counterspell

On turn three we usually want to play a threat (either Svyelun or a flash creature on the opponent's turn), protect it, and take over the game in a short amount of time. It's often wise to not interact immediately, but cast a creature on the opponent's turn and deal with whatever they played on the following turn, once we have a clock on board. **Svyelun** on turn three is best played with Force of Negation backup to protect her; **if we untap with her, it's usually game over!**

Using **Subtlety, Brazen Borrower and Tishana's Tidebinder** in the mid- to late-game, it often feels like we are "timewalking" our opponent by preventing them from impacting the game, while advancing our own board state. If games go very long, we often win with **Faerie Conclave** and/or **Hall of Storm Giants**.

Another card that defines Sea And Sky is **Chalice of the Void**, which wins games by itself when played with 1 or 0 counters. Chalice is a great way to negate the card disadvantage of our free spells, because it often blanks multiple cards in our opponent's hand. The deck's strength in the meta comes down to how well a main deck Chalice is positioned.

In a deck where you seek to trade 1:1 or even 2:1 with the free spells, we need to get ahead somehow. For that reason the manabase (brilliantly constructed by MHayashi) is actually the heart of the deck. Utility lands like **Blast Zone, Castle Vantress, Field of Ruin,** and **Otawara** or manlands, namely **Hall of Storm Giants** and **Faerie Conclave**, allow us to win any late game top-deck war, by getting tons of value out of our land drops. Not all these lands can be played in the same list, but we should have at least **4x manlands, 4x Blast Zone, and 1x Otawara** in my opinion. The rest should be chosen according to metagame analysis and preference.

While discussing lands: making our first three land drops is absolutely crucial, so **keeping two-land opening hands is risky,** unless you also have Lorien Revealed.

In my current decklist (see image below), Field of Ruin has replaced Faerie Conclave and Spreading Seas. Also, Tishana's Tidebinder is a natural addition to the deck, replacing Vendilion Clique. Lorien Revealed allows us to cut down to 22 lands while being a late-game card advantage engine. The **Watery Graves** are for Dismember and Engineered Explosives. Repeal and the fourth Svyelun (she can be clunky because of the legend rule) are flex slots; in the past, I have tried replacing them with three copies of **The One Ring**, but the card needs more testing.

After analyzing more than 150 MTGO league matches, **Sea and Sky's matchups** are as follows:

- **Living End:** Extremely favored (I am 13-0 against it!)
- **Murktide:** Very favored
- **Rhinos:** Slightly favored
- **Hammertime:** Favored (if Spreading Seas is in the main)
- **Yawgmoth:** Very unfavored
- **Creativity:** Slightly favored
- **Hardened Scales:** Very unfavored
- **Burn:** Even
- **Mono-Green Tron:** Very favored (if Spreading Seas is in the main)
- **UWx Control:** Very unfavored
- **Affinity:** Very unfavored
- **Scam:** Even to slightly unfavored
- **Amulet Titan:** Slightly favored
- **Death's Shadow:** Favored

Feel free to use my **sideboard guide (link)**, which also contains detailed matchup advice.

FLICKERFOLK

Another unique, powerful take on Mono-Blue Merfolk is "Flickerfolk." This time, **Bishark** (from the Sea & Sky history, above) was the visionary who brewed up the concept. The deck came about in 2020, and was similar to other Merfolk lists of the time with three key additions: Glasspool Mimic, Umara Wizard, and Ghostly Flicker.

Glasspool Mimic
Creature - Shapeshifter Rogue
You may have Glasspool Mimic enter the battlefield as a copy of a creature you control, except it's a Shapeshifter Rogue in addition to its other types.
Land
0/0

Umara Wizard
Creature - Merfolk Wizard
Whenever you cast an instant, sorcery, or Wizard spell, Umara Wizard gains flying until end of turn.
"You see a waterfall. I see a way up."
—Ko Dari, expedition wizard
Land
4/3

Ghostly Flicker
Instant
Exile two target artifacts, creatures, and/or lands you control, then return those cards to the battlefield under your control.
Sometimes it's useful to take a break from existence.
Raymond Swanland

Flickerfolk's games develop very similarly to normal Modern Merfolk, but with a few more tapped lands. However, later in the game, these tapped lands can be "flickered" with Ghostly Flicker; when they are exiled and returned, they enter the battlefield as their front sides, which are creatures. Umara Wizard is a beefy 4/3 that can be copied by Glasspool Mimic as they enter the battlefield simultaneously. When combined with Islandwalk lords, such big Merfolk can close out a game very quickly! Outside of its combo with the double-faced cards, Ghostly Flicker also has great utility in protecting our creatures from removal and/or simply flickering some of them for ETB value (such as Silvergill Adept and Merfolk Trickster). Merfolk Joe played a league with Flickerfolk in September 2020; you can see it in action **here**. A decklist image is below.

WITSNIPER COMBOFOLK

For a "Troll Tuesday" **video** in July 2019, Nikachu played a Modern Merfolk combo brew that his viewers cooked up. Nikachu says at the start of the video that the build was **inspired by Drakanar**, one of his viewers (and an immensely accomplished Modern Merfolk pilot), who wanted to build a Merfolk Mill deck. The combo involved playing Cloudstone Curio and Merrow Witsniper alongside Merrow Reejerey. With Curio and Reejerey on the board, we can play Witsniper to mill the opponent, then play another 1-drop (either another Witsniper or Benthic Biomancer) to bounce the Witsniper back to our hand with Curio, and untap a land with Reejerey to rinse and repeat, milling the opponent's deck. It was a pretty sketchy combo requiring multiple parts to work, but the deck had eight 1-drops and twelve lords, for a respectable simple beatdown plan if the combo didn't come together.

In the very first game of the stream, against Eldrazi Tron, Nikachu assembled the combo. While trying to figure out how to execute it on MTGO, he said "**The combo plan looks bad!**" because it involved far too many clicks. Drakanar says today, "Even at max efficiency, it still takes like seven minutes!" Instead, Nikachu chose to recast Silvergill Adept many times to simply draw enough lords to attack for the win.

Unfortunately, Nikachu went on to lose that first round. But he won the next four, against some of the top decks in the format! Inspired by this, **Drakanar began a quest to go 5-0 with Witsniper Combo**. It took him exactly ten leagues (with many 4-1s), but, eventually, he did it! You can see the winning list **here**!

Along the way, Drakanar ran into Jeff Hoogland, a well-known streamer, playing Jeskai Control. Despite being a traditionally poor matchup even for normal Modern Merfolk, and in theory being even worse against a fragile combo Merfolk build, **Drakanar won in straight games**. In the screenshots below, you can see the final stack of the match from Hoogland's perspective (left) and Drakanar's perspective (right). Hoogland conceded when he realized he forgot to Abrade Curio with Trickster on the stack (though Drakanar had Abrade covered!).

left is NOT represented in the political sphere
Well the middle ground is when you blend social and economic issues. You can be fiscally one way and social another which can lend to being centrist @hoogland
My enlightenment! What have you done!
Thank you for challenging these people in an effective way.
$5,000 CHAMPIONSHIP TRIALS EVERY MONTH
TYPE INRGEVENTS TO FIND AN EVENT NEAR YOU

PURESIGHT COMBOFOLK

Exactly one year after his stream with Witsniper Combo, Nikachu did another stream with a Mono-Blue Merfolk combo deck. This time, the combo involved equipping Puresight Merrow with Paradise Mantle to mill our own deck, then cast Thassa's Oracle to win. During the league, as he assembled the combo against Goblins, Nikachu remarked, **"This is a hell of a lot better than the Cloudstone Curio combo!"** referring to the far fewer number of clicks required to pull the combo off. Despite being easier to execute, the combo appeared very fragile and easy to disrupt with removal. Nikachu finished the league 2-3, but did get to combo off once (below right)!

Since that stream in 2020, the deck has gotten some solid additions. **Urza's Saga** can make Constructs to attack alongside our Merfolk, while also tutoring up Paradise Mantle. And **Vodalian Hexcatcher**'s ability can help counter any removal spells trying to interrupt the combo. The updated decklist below is provided by Bishark, who has some experience with the deck and thinks this would be a good build moving forward.

Remarkably, the Puresight Merrow/Paradise Mantle/Thassa's Oracle package has featured in some published results… in **Hammertime** lists! **Here** is an example of one list that made Top 16 of a large event in Japan in February 2022.

CHAPTER 16: *To Splash or Not to Splash*

THE BENEFITS OF BEING MONO-BLUE

There are always **trade-offs** involved when putting together a Magic deck. Running fewer lands means a higher chance of drawing spells, but at the risk that you may be unable to cast them. The unpredictability of your deck's performance from one game to the next is referred to as "**variance**," and is something that good players seek to minimize by whatever means possible, while still achieving the desired aims of their deck. For example, in five-color decks in Modern, variance is reduced by playing fetchlands, which, in combination with shocklands and triomes, give players a great deal of freedom in which lands they choose to play. However, even with the flexibility that fetchlands provide, it is still possible to not be able to get a very specific land one might need. For example, one can't fetch a Sacred Foundry (Mountain Plains) off a Misty Rainforest (only able to find Forests and Islands).

This concept of variance is discussed at length in this **video** from Merfolk Joe's Guide to Modern Merfolk.

Mono-color decks, by their very nature, involve far less variance than multi-color decks. All of our lands (save for Mutavault) only make blue mana, and all of our spells only require blue mana. As a result, we're virtually always able to cast our spells as long as we're making land drops. It's easy to take this for granted, but drawing the wrong lands and being unable to cast your spells is a real risk in playing multi-color decks. Mono-color decks avoid this risk almost entirely.

Another compelling reason to play a mono-color deck is to avoid taking damage from your lands. Damage from fetchlands, shocklands, and canopy lands can really add up in multi-color decks. By running pain-free lands, we gain an edge against any kind of aggressive strategy that wants to attack our life total. (Note, painful manabases also increase variance; there will be games where one's life total is too low to crack a fetchland, play a shockland, or tap a canopy land, and one may lose such games because of this.)

Thus, **mono-color decks will lose significantly fewer games to variance** than multi-color decks, a clear benefit. Another benefit of reducing variance is that player skill plays a more important role, more often. This requires constant engagement and close consideration of one's plays, **making gameplay and victories more rewarding**. This fact is understood and greatly valued by Modern Merfolk players!

WHY CONSIDER SPLASHING?

As mentioned in the first sentence above, every deck-building decision in Magic involves **trade-offs**. Even though playing a mono-color deck reduces variance, which is great, it does limit our card pool to just one of Magic's five colors, which leaves a lot of power on the table. Many Merfolk players have tried adding secondary colors to the deck to gain access to some of the powerful spells they offer.

While data shows that the overwhelming majority of successful Merfolk decks have been mono-blue, a subset of players *have* managed to find success by adding a secondary color to the deck. Overall, **Green has been the most successful splash**, by far, with **Red having some success recently**, **White having some success in the past**, and **Black having virtually no success.**

THE GREEN SPLASH

Since the first edition of this primer was published, Simic Merfolk has gotten a couple of new toys. The most relevant has been **Cenote Scout**, from The Lost Caverns of Ixalan. It has two solid modes: a 2/2 that scries for one green mana about 66% of the time, and a 1/1 that draws a land the other 33%. The green splash has generally gotten much lighter recently, with Cenote Scout replacing Kumena's Speaker as our green one-drop, rather than being played alongside Speaker (as seen in this **decklist** December 2023).

Cenote Scout
Creature — Merfolk Scout
When Cenote Scout enters the battlefield, it explores. (Reveal the top card of your library. Put that card into your hand if it's a land. Otherwise, put a +1/+1 counter on this creature, then put the card back or put it into your graveyard.)
"If you're afraid to dive into the unknown, how will you ever find anything new?"
1/1

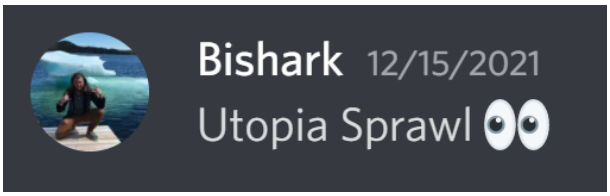
Deeproot Wayfinder
Creature — Merfolk Scout
Whenever Deeproot Wayfinder deals combat damage to a player or battle, surveil 1, then you may return a land card from your graveyard to the battlefield tapped. (To surveil 1, look at the top card of your library. You may put that card into your graveyard.)
Her warning raced through the roots and rivers of Ixalan: prepare for war.
2/3

The other new card Simic Merfolk gained was **Deeproot Wayfinder**, from March of the Machines. Though it has above-average stats at a cost of 1G, its ability doesn't quite fit into any Modern Merfolk strategy; we don't typically put lands in the graveyard. The card has, interestingly, seen more experimentation and success in the Legacy format, as seen in this **decklist** from September 2023.

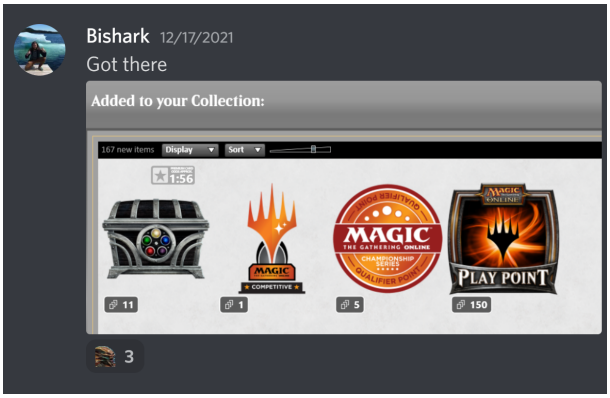
Ixalan block, printed in September 2017, introduced green Merfolk for the first time. Included were **Kumena's Speaker**, a 1-drop that is virtually always a 2/2, and **Merfolk Mistbinder**, a blue-green generic Merfolk lord. It was primarily these two new aggressive cards that inspired many to try splashing green in Modern Merfolk. This created an entire new branch in our deck's family tree, and these new blue-green strategies quickly began to take down tournaments. **Simic Merfolk** lists even managed to make Top 8 in consecutive SCG Open weekends in October 2017 (only a month after Ixalan was released).

These types of builds remained very similar until the release of Svyelun in Modern Horizons 2, in June 2021. Despite raising the curve, many pilots found it worthwhile to add Svyelun. She fixed an eternal problem with Simic Merfolk: it regularly runs out of gas. One such updated Simic list looked like **this**.

On December 15th, 2021, Bishark told everyone in the Discord that he was working on a Simic Build using **Utopia Sprawl**. The idea was that **Reejerey**'s untap ability could potentially be very powerful with a land enchanted with Utopia Sprawl, letting us play as many 2-drops as we have in our hand.



Two days later, on Friday, December 17th, Bishark achieved a 5-0 league with this new approach, dubbed "**Sprawlfolk**." This result did not make it to the mothership… but only because another pilot, Drakanar, *also* got a 5-0 with the deck!



Drakanar's result was published the following Tuesday, **December 21st**. Incredibly, Drakanar had yet another 5-0 result with Sprawlfolk published the same week, on Friday, **December 24th**. Drakanar had streamed this latter league live in the Merfolk Discord, with many excited onlookers.

Corbin Hosler
@Chosler
There's an impromptu watch party in the FishMTG Discord right now and we just watched Vial-less Simic Modern Merfolk easily 5-0 a league. Realmwalker plus Reejerey plus Utopia Sprawl is just silly.
4,957 views
0:06 / 1:53

Having read Bishark's posts on Twitter, pro Magic player, Jim Davis, featured Sprawlfolk in an **article** and **video**.

Lord Majicus featured the deck in a stream on December 24th, which can be seen **here**. He also played the deck on two other occasions, months later, **here** and **here**.

Bishark did eventually have a 5-0 result published with Sprawlfolk, on **February 4th, 2022**.

Suffice it to say, **Sprawlfolk is immensely fun and explosive.** It hasn't seen nearly as much play or results as the previous aggro-oriented Simic lists. However, it seems to have as much if not more promise. And with the printing of the **The One Ring**, the deck now has an additional juicy target to untap. We can hope more pilots will be drawn to this fun, experimental Merfolk variant in the near future.

THE RED SPLASH

Izzet Merfolk has gotten a huge boost with the printing of **Tishana's Tidebinder** and **Flame of Anor.**

Flame of Anor
Instant
Choose one. If you control a Wizard as you cast this spell, you may choose two instead.
• Target player draws two cards.
• Destroy target artifact.
• Flame of Anor deals 5 damage to target creature.

Tishana's Tidebinder
Creature — Merfolk Wizard
Flash
When Tishana's Tidebinder enters the battlefield, counter up to one target activated or triggered ability. If an ability of an artifact, creature, or planeswalker is countered this way, that permanent loses all abilities for as long as Tishana's Tidebinder remains on the battlefield. (Mana abilities can't be targeted.)
3/2

Flame of Anor can get incredible value if we control a Wizard. As it turns out, most of our Merfolk are also Wizards! And the printing of Tishana's Tidebinder (a Wizard) made a new Blue-Red build seem very promising.

A FishMTG Discord user named **RedLeader_91** piloted an innovative **Izzet Merfolk/Wizards** list to three published 5-0 results in October and November 2023. The decklists can be seen **here, here,** and **here.**

RedLeader_91 shared some insights on his particular build in November 2023:

I have played with Flame of Anor since it came out and knew it was awesome in Merfolk. I got another 5-0 before LCI came out with a similar list. Lightning Bolt and Flame are great against Scam and Yawgmoth; it's good interaction with their key pieces as well as early threats - looking at you Ragavan. Flame can also destroy artifacts, which is handy against Titan, Hammer, Scales, and Tron (Ensnaring Bridge).

This deck doesn't need Cavern because we are playing at instant speed most of the time. I'm playing four basics and six fetches so we can fetch out of Blood Moon if they decide to go for that. We have cut Lord of Atlantis - in general, it's not very impactful and not interactive. You should know by now that Tishana's Tidebinder is amazing, and also happens to be a wizard. You could trade out Silvergill if you really wanted for another creature, but the draw makes the deck more consistent.

In the sideboard: Stern Scolding is for Scam and Yawgmoth. Harbinger is for Rhinos, Murktide, and Hammer. Void Mirror hits Rhinos, Living End… plus maybe Tron. The card has upside vs Chalice. Emrakul is for Mill - I have been playing against that deck a lot on MTGO lately, and was losing until I put Emrakul in the sideboard.

Prior to 2023, before Tidebinder and Flame were printed, there was a rare **Top 16** result for the red splash in November 2022. The pilot included a singleton **Magus of the Moon** to the main deck to attack the greedy manabases of the format. Between Cavern being able to name "Wizard,", Fiery Islet providing red mana, and Aether Vial frequently getting ticked up to three, the spicy singleton wouldn't have been too difficult to get on the table when it was drawn.

In general, Red provides access to the valuable Flame of Anor, Lightning Bolt (and other red removal spells), and effects like Magus of the Moon and Blood Moon. Hopefully we will continue to see innovation with this splash!

Magus of the Moon
Creature — Human Wizard
Nonbasic lands are Mountains.
Tidal forces of the blood moon wrench and buckle the land, drawing monoliths of stone and soil toward the flaming orb.
2/2

THE WHITE SPLASH

When people splash white in Modern Merfolk today, it's typically for **Unsettled Mariner**, first and foremost. This Shapeshifter has the "changeling" ability, which makes it all creature types in all zones. Thus, like an activated Mutavault, Unsettled Mariner is a Merfolk! Its effect is similar to the "ward 1" that Svyelun gives all our Merfolk, except, with Mariner, it applies to spells that target *us*, the player, as well!

In addition to Mariner, another pull towards white for Modern Merfolk is **Wanderwine Hub**, a Blue/White dual land that enters the battlefield untapped if we reveal a Merfolk. This is about as close to actual Tundra as any Modern land can be, and makes the white splash less painful for Merfolk players.

The final primary reason one might splash white is access to **powerful white sideboard cards**. These include some of the most hateful spells in the game against artifacts (Stony Silence; Kataki, War's Wage), red strategies (Kor Firewalker; Burrenton Forge-Tender), and graveyards (Rest in Peace), as well as excellent removal options (Prismatic Ending; Path to Exile).

Unsettled Mariner
Creature — Shapeshifter
Changeling (This card is every creature type.)
Whenever you or a permanent you control becomes the target of a spell or ability an opponent controls, counter that spell or ability unless its controller pays 1.
The call of the sea shapes many souls.
2/2

Wanderwine Hub
Land
As Wanderwine Hub enters the battlefield, you may reveal a Merfolk card from your hand. If you don't, Wanderwine Hub enters the battlefield tapped.
: Add or .
Below the great river, a bustling hub channels the flow of merrow trade.

Rest in Peace
Enchantment
When Rest in Peace enters the battlefield, exile all graveyards.
If a card or token would be put into a graveyard from anywhere, exile it instead.
Some corpses the Golgari cannot claim. Some souls the Orzhov cannot shackle.

With Lorwyn having been printed way back in 2007, the white splash in Modern Merfolk has been around a long time! **Here** is a list that **Michael Majors** played at Pro Tour Return to Ravnica in October **2012**, where he placed in the Top 32. Note the playset of Wanderwine Hubs and Path to Exile in the main deck, and the white hatebears in the sideboard (Thalia and Canonist). And **here** is a take, years later, from **TheDogFish**, going 5-0 in an MTGO Modern League in January **2021**.

THE BLACK SPLASH

While **Lurrus of the Dream Den** was still legal in Modern, **Bishark** played many Merfolk variants using Lurrus as a companion, with several published results (**here**, **here**, **here**, and **here**). Lurrus requires either white or black mana, and all of Bishark's published results were with the white splash. However, he did experiment a bit with an innovative Blue/Black approach running Lurrus, as well.

Merfolk Windrobber acted as a pseudo Mishra's Bauble on a body, in combination with Lurrus. Windrobber also helped put cards in the opponent's graveyard, which turned on **Drown in the Loch** as excellent countermagic and removal in one card. The best Bishark managed to do with this black splash was a 4-1 league result.

In order for the black splash to have any hope of becoming attractive in Modern Merfolk, we would likely need to see several strong new cards printed; existing options are not very exciting at all, unfortunately.

CHAPTER 17: *Modern Merfolk on a Budget*

A GREAT WAY TO START

As mentioned in Chapter 1, one of the most compelling features of Modern Merfolk for newer players is that **even a budget-oriented build can be competitive!** Below is a decklist that was assembled with a **$200 budget** in mind to build Modern Merfolk in paper. The same list costs approximately $150 on Magic Online. The list, with current prices, can be seen **here.**

Budget Modern Merfolk
December 2023

CREATURES (29)
4 Rishadan Dockhand
4 Tide Shaper
3 Lord of Atlantis
4 Master of the Pearl Trident
4 Vodalian Hexcatcher
4 Merfolk Trickster
4 Svyelun of Sea and Sky
2 Tishana's Tidebinder

NON-CREATURE SPELLS (11)
4 Aether Vial
4 Deeproot Pilgrimage
3 Dismember

LANDS (20)
16 Island
4 Mutavault

SIDEBOARD (15)
4 Spell Pierce
3 Spreading Seas
3 Cursed Totem
3 Harbinger of the Tides
2 Void Mirror

Comparing this list to the "generic full-powered" one in Chapter 13, you'll notice that **nearly all the cards are the same!** Below are the cards missing from the budget list, and what they have been replaced with (in parentheses). The order from top to bottom is the recommended order in which one should seek to upgrade the deck over time.

- **Tishana's Tidebinder** (Lord of Atlantis/Deeproot Pilgrimage) - Pricey but extremely strong
- **Otawara, Soaring City** (Island) - Pricey but very functional
- **Subtlety** (Cursed Totem) - Pricey but very functional
- **Force of Negation** (Spell Pierce) - Quite pricey but extremely strong
- **Cavern of Souls** (Island) - Quite pricey but extremely strong
- **Chalice of the Void** (Void Mirror) - Very pricey and not strictly necessary
- **Minamo, School at Water's Edge** (Island) - Quite pricey and not strictly necessary

CHAPTER 18: *Resources*

CONTENT CREATORS

Modern Merfolk is fortunate to have a number of dedicated content creators! Below is a list of our creators and their various channels.

NIKACHU

- **Nikachu MTG Live** - Live streaming gameplay (a variety of decks)
- **Nikachu Plays MTG** - Uploaded gameplay content
- **Nikachu MTG** - Fun, general interest MTG content

MHAYASHI

- **Magic M Hayashi** - His main channel, primarily featuring Mono-Red with occasional Merfolk videos
- **MHayashi Media** - His secondary channel for gameplay with other decks

LORD MAJICUS

- **Lord Majicus** - Modern and Legacy Merfolk streams and other MTG-related content

L0RDACEX

- **L0rdAceX on Twitch** - Modern Merfolk and other MTG live streams
- **Sherwin Plays Merfolk** - Uploads of L0rdAceX live stream gameplay

DRACO_WING

- **Draco_Wing** - Modern Merfolk gameplay and analysis, and other Merfolk-related videos

LORD OF FISH

- **Lord of Fish** - Educational, fun, and beautifully-edited Modern Merfolk content

MERFOLK JOE

- **Merfolk Joe** - Currently inactive but a huge library of deeply analytical gameplay and strategy videos

IMPORTANT SPECIFIC VIDEOS

The links below are to individual videos or playlists that are essential specific resources for learning more about Modern Merfolk gameplay, history, and more.

MERFOLK JOE'S GUIDE TO MODERN MERFOLK

- **Merfolk Joe's Guide to Modern Merfolk** - An in-depth video primer of Modern Merfolk from 2016. Nearly all of the ideas are still relevant today. The series covers everything from general subjects such as "How the Deck Wins" and "The Role of Consistency in Success," to videos specifically focused on the deck's creatures, non-creature spells, and lands, respectively.

NIZZAHON MAGIC'S HISTORY OF MERFOLK

- **Merfolk: Magic's FIRST (and Best?) Tribal Deck** - An excellent video that traces the tribe's history all the way back to Alpha, with the printing of Lord of Atlantis. Has great information about many formats, including Extended, Standard, Modern, Legacy, and Vintage. A must-watch for all Merfolk fans!

GENERAL RESOURCES OF INTEREST

Below are links to archived versions of some of the most important articles regarding the founding of the Modern format, as well as Wizards' constantly-evolving philosophy underpinning the format (note that the links may take a long time to load). It is important for players investing time and money in Modern to understand its history, and to know how Wizards regards the format. Further down are links to some very useful articles of general interest.

EARLY ARTICLES ON THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN FORMAT

- **"A Modern Proposal"** (May 27, 2011) - The very first article on the formation of the Modern format. It explains that the Legacy format was growing in popularity, but, due to the Reserve List, many people could not afford to buy into Legacy. The Modern format would include only cards from 8th Edition onward, thus eliminating all cards from the Reserve List, and presumably lowering the cost of entry. The article also laid out the first banned list, with rationales for all the bannings. (A particular point of interest for us Merfolk players is they mention Aether Vial as a "very powerful card" that they chose not to include on the initial ban list.) **NOTE!** These articles are *not available anywhere on any active websites on the internet!* It took me quite a while to dig through the Internet Archive "Wayback Machine" to find these archived versions. The links may take a long time to load!

- **"Welcome to the Modern World"** (August 12, 2011) - This article announced that the new Modern format would replace the Extended format at that year's Pro Tour. It also provided an expanded banned list for the full, proper introduction of Modern to the world. In explaining their criteria used for the list, they cited a rationale which would become an oft-referenced founding principle of Modern (but which would gradually be abandoned over the years, as power creep would make decks faster and faster): *"First, we have a rule of thumb about Legacy that we don't like consistent turn-two combination decks, but that turn-three combination decks are okay. We modified that rule for Modern by adding a turn to each side:* ***we are going to allow turn-four combination decks, but not decks that consistently win the game on turn three.*** *We banned enough additional cards that we think such decks no longer exist in this format."* Some notable inclusions in Modern's initial banned list (which have since been unbanned) were: Stoneforge Mystic; Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle; Bitterblossom; Jace, the Mind Sculptor; Ancestral Vision; and Sword of the Meek. More than a quarter of the original banned list cards are now legal in the format!

- **"The Modern Future"** (November 4, 2011) - This third founding article about the Modern format opened with a summary of Pro Tour Philadelphia, where the format proved "to be pretty broken," with turn three combos and explosive big-mana Cloudpost decks. Despite this, the format was extremely well-received. It began being used in local events in Seattle and on MTGO. The banned list was expanded to include Blazing Shoal (to slow Infect down), Rite of Flame (to slow Storm down), Cloudpost (to slow BreachPost combo down), Green Sun's Zenith (it was deemed to strong as both turn one ramp with Dryad Arbor and as a late-game tutor), and Ponder and Preordain (which were included as full playsets in five of the Top 8 decks of the Pro Tour). For a fascinating look at Modern in its early days, check out these **Top 8 decklists** from Pro Tour Philadelphia! The article wraps up with a nice statement regarding Wizards' intentions regarding Modern: ***"Modern will have the time and support it needs to grow into something big and successful.*** *Part of that will be running high-level tournaments using the format. Part of that will also be making the format into something that we think people want to play. We have curated Legacy carefully over time, and as we have gotten more experience with what its players want, the format has grown. I expect the same thing will happen to Modern."*

- **"Developing Modern"** (June 21, 2013) - This article by Sam Stoddard included the fascinating (if dubious) claim that Wizards has Modern in mind while developing sets for Standard: *"I've heard before… that we don't really develop for… Modern, but that isn't quite true. While it is true that Standard and Limited make up the majority of our sanctioned tournaments, and therefore get the majority of our attention and development resources,* ***we do make sure to look out for Modern… Our playtesting of the format is minimal, but [we] are knowledgeable enough to keep an eye out while working on [new sets]."***

- **"Where Modern Goes From Here"** (April 24, 2016) - This piece by Aaron Forsythe (Vice President of Design at Wizards) opened by explaining why Modern would no longer be a Pro Tour format, after being the marquee format of these events since Modern's inception. (Note, the format would return to the Pro Tour within a couple years of this article. For more on the very interesting history of Modern at the Pro Tour, check out this **2013 article by Meghan Wolff**.) Forsythe continues in the article to list his answers to the question of "What we want Modern to be." These kinds of statements are always interesting to revisit years later, after many evolutions in the format:
  "Modern should:
  - ***Be a fun way to play Magic (first, and easy to forget, but very important!)***
  - ***Let you tap into your collection to expand upon established decks and familiar strategies from Magic's recent past***
  - ***Offer different types of decks and gameplay than what you typically see in Standard***
  - ***Not rotate, allowing you to keep a deck for a long period of time***
  - ***Consist of cards that we are willing and able to reprint***

  Those are the easy ones. Beyond those, Modern should:
  - ***Have a diverse top-tier metagame featuring over a dozen archetypes***
  - ***Not be dominated by fast, non-interactive decks (consistent kills before turn four are a red flag)***
  - ***Be at a power level that allows some newly printed Standard cards to affect the format (we don't have other ways to introduce cards into the format, and we like it when cards or decks can transition)***
  - ***Have as small a banned list as possible that accomplishes all the previous goals"***

OFFICIAL COLOR PIE ARTICLE

- **"Mechanical Color Pie 2021"** (October 18, 2021) - Mark Rosewater lays out in great detail which mechanics are primary, secondary, and tertiary to the five colors of Magic.

FETCHLANDS IN MONO-COLORED DECKS?

- **"Mathemagics: Onslaught Fetchlands"** (October 18, 2021) - A very thorough mathematical analysis explaining why mono-colored decks should not run fetchlands simply for a "deck-thinning" effect.

CHAPTER 19: *Acknowledgements*

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